

Home  
Most Recent  
Titles  
Series  
Search  
Top Tens  
Characters  
Contact Us  
Login

## All In by Arsenic

[Reviews - 1062] 

**- Text Size ±**

**AN:** I want to thank the prompter at Suits Meme for inspiring this, and everyone who stuck by it, chapter by chapter, as it was being written. The title has been changed--to what it was originally supposed to be--and it has been cleaned up, but NOT beta'ed. Also used as my wild card in hc\_bingo--fill: slavefic.

sparsenicjade

amaryllis ▼

**XML**

**Warnings:** This is slavefic. If you can think of something triggery that might be in slavefic, it's probably in here, plus some het domestic abuse and rape. Please do not proceed if you are concerned about being triggered.

\*\*\*

Harvey's all but got the potential client in Pearson Hardman's metaphorical lap when the kid walks in the room and changes—quite literally—the game.

\*

Jessica sends Harvey to Jerren Van Kindt's poker game because, as she tells him, she knows three things: 1. Van Kindt is using the game as a way of feeling out the city's legal power players, 2. Van Kindt is an Old Boy's Club kind of guy, and 3. Harvey has an uncanny poker face.

Harvey likes a solid game of poker now and then, especially against worthy opponents. Sheldon Hanes from Skadden, Nate Braddock from Sidley, Philip Lovell from Kirkland, and Frank Prince from Reed Smith all fulfill that description. Terry Brant from Winston less so, and Van Kindt is an unknown, but it's enough for Harvey to sense he'll enjoy this part of the hunt.

Van Kindt likes Harvey from the minute Harvey shows up. He's the kind of guy who's an easy read. Give him just enough challenge that when Harvey goes down to him, it will seem real. In the meantime, talk a little baseball and hockey in between games. Child's play.

By eleven Harvey's eliminated the competition, and it's just him and

the client. The firm is going to owe him twenty grand tomorrow, but considering the fifteen million or so it stands to make on this client long-term, Jessica figured it was worth the investment.

Harvey's just about laid down his bet when someone walks into the room. Harvey looks up. "Thought this was a closed game."

"It is," Van Kindt says, and snaps his fingers. The person—kid—who slipped in the room, hastens to Van Kindt's side. He's in jeans and nothing else. He's probably six foot, but Harvey doubts he weighs more than 125 pounds, and that's being generous. His ribs are starkly evident, as is each vertebrae. Harvey cannot catalogue the bruises and scars evident with a single look.

Van Kindt pulls the kid down onto his knee. The slight shiver the kid evinces, the shake in his hands, would suggest nerves, fear, but when Harvey catches a glance of the kid's face, there's nothing there. Harvey has seen whitewall fences with more expression than the kid has.

Van Kindt runs a hand down the kid's knobbed spine, over a spot that makes the kid whimper. Even as he makes the sound, his expression never changes. It's eerie. Van Kindt says, "Don't mind Mikey. He's just my good luck charm. Aren't you, pup?"

Mikey answers, "Yes master," promptly and without any tone at all.

Without knowing what the hell he's doing—only that Jessica is probably going to be pissed in the morning, and Kirkland Ellis is about to have a new client Pearson Hardman had singled out—Harvey says, "Seems unfair, you getting to have a good luck charm."

"Worried, Specter?"

Harvey quirks a smile. "Not really. Just. Well, I would rather like a good luck charm of my own."

Van Kindt is silent for a moment. "What are you suggesting?"

"Winner takes the pot." Harvey pauses. "And Mikey."

"Mikey here is worth more than the pot. I have him trained up just right."

"Should make it interesting then, right?"

Van Kindt hesitates, but Harvey knows he's got him. He's spent all night reading the man. Van Kindt's someone who likes the thrill, likes control, likes *winning*. And he believes he can. He believes Harvey will let him. Three minutes ago, he would have been right.

Van Kindt raises an eyebrow and says, "Very well, then. All in."

\*

Harvey surreptitiously enjoys the look on Van Kindt's face when Harvey lays his—winning—hand down. He does not enjoy the way the kid goes even more rigid, or the way Van Kindt stands, bringing the kid to his feet by way of a hand in his hair.

Van Kindt says, "A deal's a deal."

Harvey is about to do his best at being a low-key winner, when Van Kindt says, "But first, one more thing before I give away my end of the bet."

Van Kindt's voice would ignite Harvey's gut even if Harvey wasn't already on alert. He waits for Van Kindt to reveal what his one-more-thing is. He doesn't have to wait long.

"Mikey knows I like to watch, don't you, Mikey?"

Mikey answers up, "Yes, master." Harvey thinks he sees a glint of trepidation, but if he does, it's gone before he can really identify it.

Van Kindt smirks. "One last service, I think."

Before Harvey can understand what's happening—or control it, for that matter—Mikey's on his knees in front of Harvey, undoing his five thousand dollar trousers with his *teeth*. Neither abject terror nor apathy turn Harvey on, though, so when Mikey removes Harvey's dick with his tongue and lips, Harvey's soft.

Harvey says, "Van Kindt—"

"Don't you want to see what you're getting?"

"I'm not an exhibitionist, so no." This is something of a lie, but Harvey's never felt it to be more true than at this moment.

On the ground, Mikey's shoulders are shaking. He still has Harvey in his mouth.

"Let us do it this way. I win this round, your firm still gets its newest client."

Harvey does his best to keep the poker face that's been so easy most of the night. "Fine."

Mikey goes to work then, and he's good, but Harvey doesn't want this, not here and not now and it takes a long time, long enough that even were half of Mikey's face not covered in bruising, Harvey has to imagine it would not be comfortable. When Harvey's finally hard, Mikey swallows him down, keeping him there until Mikey gags on him, tears streaming from his eyes. It's the most professional and least enjoyable blowjob Harvey has ever had. It's a miracle he manages to come.

When he does, he picks Mikey up off the floor, zips himself back up and smiles politely at Van Kindt. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Van Kindt smiles a cheshire-cat smile. "Look forward to continuing our professional relationship."

\*

Mikey follows Harvey out of the building in his jeans: no shoes and no shirt. It's late November, and while it's not freezing out, it's a close thing. Harvey's unduly appreciative of having a driver at that moment. The kid doesn't even put his arms around himself, just stands there and shakes.

Now that they're out of the room, out from beneath Van Kindt's stare and the haze of competitive stakes poker play, Harvey's not entirely sure what the hell he was thinking. To stave off having to figure that out, Harvey asks, "How much?"

Mikey looks at him. "Master?"

"Harvey or sir," Harvey says, because the way Mikey says the word "master" makes Harvey slightly nauseated. "Van Kindt bought you from a debt broker, right?"

"Yes, sir." Then, "He took the contract for my grandmother's nursing home care."

*Brilliant.* Not only does Harvey now have a slave he neither wants nor needs, it's a slave with unpaid bills. Next time, Jessica is wooing the client. The car pulls up and Harvey ushers the kid inside. Mikey tries to kneel on the floor.

"Mikey-- Mike. On the seat. Like a human being." Consensual or not, Harvey isn't really comfortable calling a guy who just gave him a blowjob by a name that makes said guy seem about seven.

Mike obeys, which isn't really a shock at this point. He keeps himself tense and contained. Even in the dark of the car, Harvey can see the shiny edges of scabs that have formed in jagged lines over his back and chest, near his knuckles. Harvey bites back a sigh. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Two days, six hours ago, sir."

Weirdly specific, but Harvey can't say for certain that he wouldn't be that way if he were regularly starved. At least it gives Harvey something tangible to do. Mike's upright, so he probably doesn't need a hospital and Harvey hasn't got a fucking clue what he might need emotionally, but food is pretty easy. "Okay, well. We'll start there."

\*

After making it clear that Mike is allowed to—that Harvey *prefers* he—touch the furniture, i.e., sit on chairs rather than kneel on the floor, Harvey goes into the kitchen and makes eggs and toast. He isn't an expert at starvation or anything, but common sense tells him plain food is where to start. Also, Harvey likes breakfast foods as a midnight snack, and he can actually manage eggs and toast, as opposed to pretty much anything else.

Harvey sets the plates at the counter and sits himself next to Mike. He's about three bites in when he realizes Mike isn't eating. Harvey pauses. "Do you not like eggs?"

"I like eggs, sir."

"Then eat."

"Yes, sir." Mike's hand shakes as he picks up the fork, but even though he's clearly starving, he cuts the toast and egg into bite-sized pieces, eating slowly. Harvey wonders if Mike even realizes he's hunched over the plate, as though that will help if Harvey decides to take it away. Harvey wonders if Mike would fight if Harvey tried. Harvey doubts it.

Another thought occurs to Harvey. "Were you waiting for permission to eat?"

"Yes, sir."

"In the future, don't."

"Yes, sir."

Harvey has always thought he would enjoy mindless obeisance, but as it turns out, it's just really fucking annoying.

\*

Harvey finds some sweats from at least one million years ago and Mike still swims in them, but they don't actually fall off. Harvey considers it a win, even if he had to expressly order Mike to change into them. He's starting to be concerned that Mike's a little special. That thought disappears when Mike strips off his jeans—and okay, Harvey hadn't meant for him to change *right there*, but evidently specificity is necessary—and reveals himself to be wearing a chastity device that's more torture-oriented than celibacy, and to be hiding marks that put the scars on his upper body to shame.

Harvey whistles low without even thinking about it. Mike jumps about a foot in the air. Harvey shakes his head and murmurs, "Didn't mean to startle you," but he can't look away, either. Finally, he asks, "That thing have a key, or something?"

"Master Van Kindt has it, sir."

Not as though Harvey didn't see that coming, but it's going to make things complicated. The device is twisting Mike's cock and looks like it's actually irritating the skin even with Mike flaccid. Because of the twist, Harvey isn't wholly sure, but he thinks the cage might include a sounding component. There's very definitely a piercing at the base of Mike's cock that makes Harvey a little faint just looking at it.

Harvey runs a hand over his face. This is not his life. "Can you urinate with that thing on?"

There's a slight hesitation before Mike responds, "Yes, sir." The answer sounds defeated. Harvey thinks it must hurt to do so.

There isn't anything Harvey can do right now, not for that problem, so he says, "Get dressed."

"Yes, sir."

He shows Mike to the guest room and makes sure he knows where the lights and the toilet and anything else he might need are. Then he says, "Get some sleep."

Mike, unshockingly, says, "Yes, sir."

\*

Harvey wakes up feeling unsettled. It's dark, and his alarm hasn't gone

off, so he's pretty sure he hasn't been asleep all that long. He rolls over and reaches out to turn on his lamp. There's nothing out of place that he can see.

He gets up and pads to his door, opening it. He almost takes a step outside. He manages to stop just in time to avoid tripping over Mike, who's kneeling in his doorway. Harvey is not really feeling at his best. "What the fuck, kid?"

Mike's voice shakes as he answers, "Couldn't sleep, sir. I thought—that is, if you needed me—"

"It's ass o'clock. There is nothing I need at this moment other than sleep. Go back to your room."

Mike gets up. It looks painful, and Harvey wonders how long Mike hasn't been able to sleep, how long he's been on his knees on the hard wood. "Yes, sir."

Harvey suppresses the urge to hit his head against the wall. "Mike."

"Sir?"

"You can read, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's prescription sleeping pills in the kitchen, the small cabinet next to the outside wall. Take one."

Harvey's expecting a simple, "Yes, sir" and for Mike to go and do as told. Really, experience has taught him there's no reason to believe he'll get anything else.

He gets something else. He gets Mike on his knees, all but babbling, "Please, sir, what did I do? I can do better, I promise, I'm-- I never forget mistakes, if you just tell me, I'll—"

"Shut up," Harvey says, which is probably harsher than he should be, given Mike's clear emotional damage, but he's kind of freaked out by the unintended consequences of a pretty simple order.

Mike shuts up, but his breathing is sharp, on the edge of keening, really.

"Okay," Harvey says, a little slowly. "Sleeping pills are...not considered good in your world."

Mike manages a, "Please, sir," and looks fairly terrified by being that daring.

Harvey would honestly like to think he's enough of an asshole to decide he doesn't care and either a) make Mike just take the damn pill and prove there's nothing scary about it, or b) send him back to bed without it and order him to stay, sleep or no. As it turns out, though, he's not. Plan C, then. "C'mon, we're going downstairs."

\*

The building's gym is empty, which is less than surprising, seeing as

how it's nearly four in the morning. Harvey key cards them in and takes them to the treadmills. He's run barefoot on them before, so he knows it's doable.

Harvey says, "Pick your pace. Keep going until you feel like you're going to fall off. *Don't* actually fall off."

"Yes, sir."

Harvey gets on the treadmill beside Mike, and chooses his own pace. It helps. He's not sure he could have gone right back to bed. He's still hearing the terror in Mike's voice at the thought that he'd done something wrong. Harvey has been scared in his life, but never, ever like that. The feel of his feet hitting the tread, the controlling of his breath, it makes it easier to calm down, drown out the sick feeling of not understanding.

It takes almost half an hour, which is longer than Harvey would have thought, given that Mike is clearly suffering from malnutrition. When Mike turns the machine off, he has to cling to the rails, and his legs are wobbly, but he does not fall off.

Harvey asks, "Can you make it back upstairs on your own?"

Mike ducks his head. "I—I don't know, sir. You-- Um, I don't—"

"I didn't tell you that was necessary, I know. It's okay. C'mon."

Harvey takes Mike's arm, careful to touch above where there are still-healing abrasions around the wrist. He puts the arm over his shoulders, and helps to support Mike back to the elevator.

"Sorry, sir."

"Think you might be able to sleep?"

Harvey's too close not to feel the shudder that runs through Mike's body, but all he says is, "Possibly, sir."

"Well, just try your best." Harvey isn't used to acknowledging that someone under his command might not be able to get something done, but he thinks, in this instance, it might be the better part of valor.

"I will, sir." Then, tentatively, "Thank you, sir."

"For running you ragged?" Harvey's half-joking, half-curious.

"For not pun-- I mean, for listening to me. Sir."

"Oh." The sick feeling in Harvey's stomach has returned. "You're welcome."

\*

In the morning, Harvey does what he always does when he's in over his head: he calls Jessica. He makes a quick run to the bakery two blocks over and picks up cheese Danish, which is her favorite, and an assortment of breads. At least that way, Mike can have variable kinds of toast. He also gets a box of coffee, the kind meant for office parties.

He and Jessica sit and work their way through it while he explains the situation. At the end, Jessica tells him, "Next time, I'm seducing the client. Old boys club or no."

"Be my guest. In the meantime—"

"I think a doctor's probably in order, Harvey."

"I was hoping for something more along the lines of 'I know a buyer who won't starve the kid to death.'"

"That's going to take time. For right now, a doctor."

Harvey nods. "I'm going to be late to the office, obviously. Tell Donna that if Van Kindt calls, to forward him through to my cell. I don't want him to think he's thrown us off our game."

"No, no reason for him to believe that," Jessica says wryly. Then, "What are you going to do if you have to call him for the key?"

Harvey has some ideas, but, "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

\*

It comes to that. The doctor's visit is completely traumatizing for pretty much everyone involved. Harvey takes Mike to his personal physician, because Harvey has saved said physician's legal ass on more than one occasion, and he knows the doctor will make time for him, immediately. Due to the fact that Indebted Servants do not have legal personhood after a sale of self, Harvey has to be in there with Mike to agree or disagree to treatment or whatever else might come up.

In addition to the starvation, Mike's got a broken bone in his right wrist that wasn't set right and that's going to need to be rebroken and reset. He's suffering from Chlamydia, a mild infection in one of the burns on his inside right thigh, and a semi-persistent cough that is probably just from how depressed his immune system is. They clean the burn up and bandage it on site. Harvey sets up a time for the wrist procedure, and has the doctor write scripts for the necessary meds, as well as an eating plan to combat the malnutrition.

Then he asks, "How do we get the cock cage off?"

Mike has been very stoic through the whole process, even when the doctor was prodding at his wrist and cleaning the burn, both of which had to hurt. When the doctor goes to inspect the problem, his breathing picks up, little huffs of air. Harvey isn't sure what causes him to think his touch will calm Mike, but he lays his hand flat between Mike's shoulder blades and says, "Slower breaths."

"Y-yes, sir."

In fairness, the kid does try. But one or two seconds of looking and the doctor says, "You're either gonna have to recover the key or find someone who can make one. Way too much risk of damage to try cutting it off. And I'd say the sooner the better. I don't think he's in any immediate danger, but the possibility of infection with that sounding component is pretty high, not to mention the sheer discomfort."

Harvey doesn't want to have this discussion with Van Kindt. Oh wow,



however does he not. But if the doctor's gentle examination is causing Mike pain—and it clearly is—there's not a locksmith in the world he trusts to be careful enough with the project. Harvey sighs. "Okay."

Underneath his hand, Mike is shaking. Harvey wishes he could tell the kid to trust him, or that things will be all right. Unfortunately, Harvey only lies for professional reasons. This doesn't count.

\*

"Sure," Van Kindt says. "Of course, I knew I forgot something."

Harvey controls a sneer. Like it or not, he and this man are a little too alike. Forgot something, Harvey's ass.

"Only, really, it's an expensive piece of hardware."

Mhm. Harvey pulls out his negotiation smile. "Name your price."

"Get him hard," Van Kindt says. "Hard enough that he's begging to have it come off."

Harvey bites his tongue to keep himself from asking if there's any other way. This is not the time to show hesitance or weakness. "I suppose you'll want to watch."

"Where would the fun be in it, otherwise?"

*Indeed, you twisted fuck.* "I get the key now. And you stay silent throughout."

"Ah ah—"

"Key now and silence, or we walk out, and I find someone to pick the lock."

Van Kindt assesses him. Harvey doesn't blink. Bluffing is almost too easy in this instance. Van Kindt smiles, not nicely. "Very well."

\*

Harvey realizes pretty quickly that Van Kindt left out a few details. For instance, when Harvey has Mike naked and carefully tucked against his chest, and he takes Mike's hand, thinking they'll start this together, that Mike can at least control the situation to some extent, Mike tightens his arm so hard that even being stronger than him, Harvey can't make it go anywhere, not without hurting Mike. There's going to be enough of that already.

Harvey rubs at Mike's arm and asks, "What's wrong?"

"No-not allowed."

"Not allowed...to touch yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

Harvey narrows his eyes. "What else aren't you allowed to do, Mike?"

"Use Master's hand or Master's mouth, sir."

"I'm guessing just telling you you're allowed, that I'd like you to, isn't going to undo months of training by torture, huh?"

Mike's breathing picks up. "I can try, sir, I can—"

"Sh, sh. How are you allowed to get hard?"

"If—if it hurts," Mike says, swallowing. "Or if Master is using me."

In the corner, Van Kindt is smirking. Harvey doesn't care. He's glad he put the silence provision on the table ahead of time.

Harvey's day is really just not getting any better. "Mike. I want you to pick how you want to get hard. Can you do that?"

It takes a second before Mike says, "Like, like this. From behind, please, sir."

"Instead of like last night?" Harvey asks, his thumb still brushing in a pattern over Mike's arm.

"If it pleases—"

"No. No, Mike, I'm asking what you want." Which is ridiculous, because the kid can't want any of this, but it's the best Harvey's got.

"Like this, please, sir," Mike repeats.

"Okay," Harvey says softly. He shifts Mike until the kid is off his lap, and stands both of them up, positioning Mike so that he's leaning over the arm of the couch they were sitting on. This way it won't put any pressure on the injured wrist.

Harvey mouths his way down Mike's spine, secretly enjoying the surprised little sounds coming from Mike. If this weren't here and now, Harvey would be loving this, always likes coaxing enjoyment from partners. When he covers Mike's ass with his mouth and licks over it, Mike makes a broken noise, but doesn't move. Harvey tries again, and yes, Mike pushes back just a little, before snapping his hips forward, as if to apologize. Harvey reaches up and holds Mike's hips just where he wants them.

When Mike is as good and wet as Mike is going to get, Harvey peers around. Evidently Van Kindt didn't exactly work on training Mike out of enjoying rimming, because Mike's pretty well on his way there. It's obviously a struggle and the look of even Mike's half-hard cock inside the cage makes it hard for Harvey to keep his erection, but he thinks of the noises he just pulled from Mike and manages.

He takes the penetration slowly. Mike's clearly pretty used to it, and Harvey's using a lubed condom—another non-negotiable, given Mike's clap—but there's really no point in not being careful. Harvey doesn't have to imagine that Mike hasn't had much careful in the last half year of his life. Harvey angles himself up to hit Mike's prostate and concentrates on dragging long and slow against it.

Mike's mewling at this point, and one check confirms that yes, they've gotten there. Harvey murmurs in his ear, "Beg."

Mike sobs. "Not allowed."

*Of course.* Harvey's going to vomit or lose his erection or both, but he's really only got one useful card that he can see playing at this moment. "Beg, or I will make your life with him look like a vacation."

Mike keens and comes apart right underneath Harvey, begging so loudly and incoherently that Harvey *does* lose his erection and has to just pull out. That's fine, because Harvey's got better things to be doing, namely, getting Mike out of the fucking contraption. He pulls Mike onto the couch and kneels in front of him, pressing the key into the lock and then, when it clicks open, trying to extract Mike.

Mike screams as the sound comes out and Harvey feels dizzy, tries not to think about how it must have felt going *in*. When it's off, Harvey wants to throw the damn thing aside, but he'd rather Van Kindt not have it back. Instead, he orders Mike to be silent, unnerved by the fact that he's still begging, and gets him up and dressed. Thankfully, Mike's not hard anymore. Harvey's hard pressed to see how even someone without a completely fucked psychology of sex could be after that.

Harvey smiles at Van Kindt and says, "We'll be going now."

Van Kindt says, "So nice to see you."

\*

Harvey has Ray take them back to his apartment, where he orders Mike into the shower and goes to take his own. He stands under the stream until it starts to grow cold.

Mike is dry and kneeling by the bathroom door when Harvey comes out. Harvey finds another ancient pair of jeans and a belt to keep them on Mike, plus a sweatshirt from his NYU days. He wasn't even aware he'd bought a sweatshirt while at NYU. They're going to have to find Mike some actual clothes, and soon, but Harvey's pretty sure they've both had enough excitement for one day.

He contemplates leaving Mike at the apartment, but something about the idea makes Harvey feel jittery and he long ago learned to pay attention to subconscious instinct. Instead he loads Mike back into the car with him and takes them both to the office. Harvey really, really needs some normalcy.

Most days, Harvey doesn't so much mind the glass nature of his office, but for once he wishes it were easier to be out of the presence of prying eyes. Donna comes in seconds after he's arrived and says, "Jessica mentioned last night didn't go exactly as planned."

Harvey knows that tone of voice. "I should have called."

"Yeah," Donna says. Her expression suggests that *she* wouldn't have ended the evening bringing home someone who has to be given permission to go to the bathroom.

There's nothing else to be said, so Harvey resorts to politeness, or what passes for it, in this situation. He nods his head to Mike, who's already kneeling beside Harvey's desk. "Mike, this is Donna. Donna, this is Mike."

Mike ducks his head. Donna turns to Harvey with a what-the-fuck written plain across her face. Harvey tells Mike, "You can sit on the couch."

"Yes, sir." Mike moves to the couch without once raising his head.

"Jesus," Donna says aloud.

Because things can't really get any more awkward than they already are at this point, Harvey asks, "Donna can you order him some clothes? Guesstimate his size and just—"

"Done," Donna says, and turns to go. She hesitates at the door, looking over at Mike. "You want something to eat?"

Mike looks at Harvey. Harvey resists the overwhelming temptation to tell the kid to just make a damn decision. Instead he tells Donna, "Aroma for both of us, my usual, soup for him."

"Got it."

Once she's gone, Harvey sorts through the files he left for himself the day before, queuing up the Delman case for his attention first. Before starting, he looks over at Mike and says, "You can answer someone else when they ask you a question. Just be honest."

"Yes, sir."

Then, because silence isn't Harvey's favorite thing to begin with, and it's going to be excruciating with Mike in the room, Harvey puts on *Complete & Unbelievable* and allows himself to get lost considering approaches for a 56(b) motion. It feels like the first time he's relaxed in over twenty-four hours.

\*

When the food arrives about a half an hour later, Mike is asleep sitting up. Donna sets Harvey's food on his desk and then looks at the kid and back at Harvey. Mike is whimpering in his sleep, but he's actually sleeping and the doctor said he should do as much of that as possible.

"Put it in the fridge," Harvey tells her.

"I can see if I can find a blanket. The clothes should be here by tomorrow, I had them rush-delivered."

"Remind me to give you a raise. Better yet, just take care of it yourself."

"Already did."

"That's my girl."

She leaves and is back with a blanket in less than two minutes. Harvey asks her, "Seriously?"

"More than a few associates have slept here." Then, "Do you want me to—"

Harvey's not really interested in seeing what happens if Mike wakes up

to a person he's just met touching him, in a place he's not familiar with. "No. I've got it."

Donna nods and leaves the blanket on the corner of his desk. Harvey eats first, because he's starving and feels more tired than he has in years, even including the times when cases have been marathons, extending night after night. When he's finished he stands up and takes the blanket in one hand. He tries to gently tilt Mike onto his side, but Mike wakes at the very touch of Harvey's fingers.

There's gut-level panic in those eyes, and then a quiet, sick sort of acceptance that's ten times worse. Mike says, "Sir, I'm sor—"

"I just wanted to make you more comfortable."

Mike blinks, like he doesn't understand, and maybe he doesn't. Maybe he's not very smart, or maybe the terror has wiped whatever intelligence used to have been there away. Harvey doesn't know. He tries, "I thought it would be better if you were lying down."

"Oh." Mike still looks confused, but he says, "Yes, sir," and curls up on his side. Harvey shakes out the blanket and drapes it over him. Mike's hands come up, his fingers grabbing onto the soft material, like he can memorize how it feels just by touch.

If Harvey keeps looking at Mike, he's going to take him home and probably try something phenomenally stupid, like actually cooking for him. It's weird and discomfiting, that Mike makes him want to do something for someone who's not himself, or—rarely—Jessica. Instead he turns around and throws back, "Didn't mean to wake you. See if you can get back to sleep."

The "yes, sir," comes, but it's soft and slurred together, like a "g'night."

\*

Harvey stays at the office until well past dark. At some point Donna comes in to find Mike awake, heats up the soup, gives it to him and disappears again. Harvey surreptitiously checks to make sure Mike is eating the soup, but evidently his order of the night before actually registered, because the kid is taking slow, measured spoonfuls of it, all the while looking as if it's very likely to turn into dust even as he's digesting. Harvey suspects Van Kindt played games with Mike regarding food. He doesn't really want to know.

Mike must fall asleep again after the soup. Harvey would be worried, except that the doctor mentioned Mike needing rest roughly seven times in the hour and a half appointment, so he doesn't think this is unnatural. Harvey's glad for his music collection, even more so than usual. When he looks, he can see Mike jerking in his sleep, his lips moving, but Harvey doesn't have to hear the sounds he knows those movements speak to.

When Harvey is ready to acknowledge that he's actually just hiding in the office—not something he would ever admit aloud—he calls Ray and shuts down his computer. Not wanting a repeat of that afternoon's exercise in waking Mike, he tries a simple, "Mike."

Clearly, the kid is used to waking on command, because not only does he wake at his name, he's on his knees faster than Harvey's brain can

really catch up to the movement and saying, "Sorry, sir, sorry."

Harvey takes a deep breath. When that doesn't help his need to punch something, he tries another. The silence is clearly freaking Mike out, but Harvey getting snippy would probably freak him out more, so this is the lesser of the evils. When he can, he says, "You didn't do anything. We're going home. To my place."

He rolls his eyes at himself, because, seriously? Where the hell else would home be? Selling one's self into Indebted Servitude is not the first thing *anyone* does. It's not as if Mike's paying rent somewhere on the side, just in case he gets a chance to go back there someday. Harvey could use a scotch. Also, some sex that doesn't make him sick to his stomach.

"Wishes and horses," Harvey mutters under his breath.

"Sir?" Mike asks, still on the floor, head down.

"C'mon," Harvey says. "Let's go."

\*

For the next two days, life settles into a routine that reminds Harvey of a Dali painting looked at one too many times: still surreal, but starting to feel a little familiar. Mike sleeps when he's not eating or taking care of other biological needs. Harvey works. Sometimes, Harvey sleeps. Even more rarely, Mike will go an hour or two without whimpering and tossing in his sleep. It works, for certain values of "work," in any case.

Harvey takes meetings in the conference room, because his gut feeling is that most clients aren't going to react well to the wreck of a human being currently colonizing his office couch. He keeps thinking he should leave Mike at home, and keeps abandoning that plan as soon as he starts to step out the door. It's not that he thinks Mike would *do* anything, or even run for that matter. He's just not entirely sure Mike would feed himself or go to the bathroom without permission. There's a reason Harvey's never had a pet.

This suspicion pans out when Harvey has to go to court on the afternoon of the second day and gets caught there for the better part of three hours while the judge runs late on the previous case and then all-but forces settlement talks on Harvey's client. It's a lost cause, but Harvey knows when playing nice is necessary.

There's a traffic jam on the way back to the office, and it's nearly four and a half hours later when he strolls back into his office to find Mike kneeling behind the desk, naked, out of sight of prying eyes from Pearson Hardman, but not from window washers or anyone with a photo lens across the street. Harvey blinks, then blinks again, then goes with his first instinct which is to ask, "What the hell?"

Mike spills out words like he did when he was begging, apologies and pleas and then his hands are at Harvey's jacket, clearly as a way of getting to Harvey's cock. Harvey steps out of reach. Even if sniveling and terrified turned him on—he feels that his last two sexual experiences are good evidence that this is not the case—that wouldn't be happening, not before the possible eyes of Jessica and Donna and G-d Himself. Harvey says, "Stop," and Mike does, folding into his posture of obeisance.

Harvey tries, "We've had a miscommunication."

This doesn't prompt anything, so Harvey throws out, "I had to go to court. Something clearly happened that you feel merits mollifying me with sex so that I won't...I'm not really sure what you think I'm going to do, but I'm sure you have lots of experience with whatever it is."

Still nothing, so Harvey orders, "Tell me what happened."

"You said-- I thought—" Mike is starting to look even more gray with panic, and Harvey would prefer the kid not vomit on his rug.

"I'm not going to punish you. Whatever happened, that's not how I'm going to handle it. Tell me."

"You're my owner. I was taught not to...take liberties." There's a small hitch in Mike's voice, and Harvey thinks "taught" is probably a misnomer. Mike continues, "You left and I hadn't asked permission to leave. I-- When I couldn't hold it, I got off the couch. It's not, I didn't get anything dirty, sir."

Harvey says, "Stay here," and walks out of his office. Donna is still waiting for him, because Donna has a sixth sense about when things have gone to shit and he's going to need some help sifting through the rubble. He gives her the look that is meant to seem calm and in control, but that she always knows is in fact an SOS. "You didn't keep an extra pair of Mike's clothes here, did you?"

"Two steps ahead of you."

"Leave them in my office."

"Mhm."

Harvey goes to the men's restroom and wets several paper towels, then grabs a few dry with his other hand. He takes them to Mike and says, "Clean up." Then he goes and sits on the couch, to give the kid some privacy.

When Mike ventures a, "Done, sir," Harvey tosses him the clothes Donna's left just inside the door and says, "Get dressed, then come out here and sit on the couch."

"Yes, sir."

When Mike has done as told, Harvey starts, "Rule number one: if you need to do something such as eat, drink, use the restroom or any other basic human need, you have permission, always, across the board. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll figure out rule number two when and if we need it."

"Yes, sir."

"Mike—" Harvey starts, then stops, unsure of what he had planned to say. He begins to ask, "What did he—" but then it clicks, sudden and unbidden and Harvey *knows*. "That was why he put the cage on you. It wasn't even about sex, it was punishment for just...going to the

bathroom?"

Mike inclines his head. "Sir."

"I'm not him."

Harvey's really, really not expecting it when Mike, with almost perfect intonation, quotes Harvey back to himself: "Beg, or I will make your life with him look like a vacation."

Harvey feels sick all over again, short of breath and too hot, too chilled all at once. He fights through it. "That was the deal he made. You had to beg. And he knew you couldn't, but I didn't. Not until you told me. I'm good at motivating people."

Mike's head is ducked, but Harvey can see the uncertainty that passes over his features all the same. Finally, Mike says, "Yes. Sir."

"I don't like begging," Harvey clarifies. Then, more honestly, "Well, not that kind."

Mike stills in a way Harvey hasn't seen him before, and if Harvey didn't know better, he'd think there was a smile beneath the ever-present fear, like the kid actually understands and appreciates Harvey's flippancy.

It's gone too fast for Harvey to trust his feeling on that, but Mike does look up for just a moment, and when he says, "Yes, sir," it seems more like a response, rather than conditioning at its finest.

\*

Harvey has broken bones in his life. He broke a finger playing basketball in middle school, and an ankle in an ill-advised hockey stint around that same time. His coach or his mom or whoever was nearest took him to the hospital, where they gave him a sedative, set the thing and put it in a cast before too much of the horror set in. Even so, these are not Harvey's fondest memories.

Harvey's relieved when the doctor tells him they can do a muscle-relaxant for the re-breaking procedure, because he was not looking forward to telling Mike he had to take the equivalent of a sleeping pill's big brother. He's still not pleased that he has to be in the room.

He can tell Mike doesn't like being held by the nurses. Harvey almost asks if it's necessary—the kid's maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet—but the sooner this is over, the better, and arguing might generally get Harvey his way, but it almost always takes longer. He looks at Mike and says, "Breathe. Eyes on me."

There's a quiet count from the doctor and Harvey only barely manages not to cringe at the sound of the bone being rebroken. It's loud.

Mike makes a sound in the back of his throat and Harvey says, "Breathe," again. Mike obeys, but his breaths come quickly, small little pants that aren't doing him any good. Harvey shakes his head. "No. Inhale. Exhale."

He keeps the pattern of words up as they reset the bone, equally loud and clearly equally painful, even through the drugs. It's eerie, how still



Mike stays, how the only indicators of his distress are the small mewling sounds he lets through and the sick gray pallor of his skin.

They hold him while the doctor places the cast until Harvey says, "Let him go, he's not going to move."

He doesn't, either. Harvey's not surprised, but he almost wishes the kid would prove him wrong, even at both their expense. Instead Mike lets the doctor finish and looks at Harvey who's not sure what he wants. Harvey asks, "Okay?"

Mike's voice is a little shaky, his eyes are a little dull, but he strings together, "Permission to speak to someone else, sir?"

Harvey is going to break something, as soon as he's somewhere where it's his thing to break. All he's got here is Mike, and that would kind of defeat the purpose of this little trip. "Granted in perpetuity."

Mike turns to the doctor and says, "Thank you."

Harvey considers breaking more than one thing. He could use a new set of dishes anyway.

\*

Harvey has gotten so used to Mike sleeping roughly twenty hours a day that it's something of a surprise to look up from the bylaws he's drafting one day, and notice the kid not only awake, but with an actual expression on his face. Harvey's thrown for a second, so it by the time he's able to start analyzing what that expression might be, Mike has noticed he has eyes on him and ducked into himself.

"Been awake long?" Harvey asks.

Mike looks as if he's pretty sure it's a trick question. "Not tired, sir." He appends a, "Sorry, sir," on the end of it, but Mike uses apologies at the same rate that he breathes. Harvey's getting used to not even hearing them.

"Was your plan to just sit there the whole day?"

Harvey can admit—if only to himself—he probably should have thought that question out a little better. Before he can blink he's got a super apologetic Mike crawling toward Harvey's desk. Harvey really wishes he had blinds. "Not what I meant, kid. Back on the couch."

"What, did you think this was some kind of...sick leave while you were getting better?"

Mike still looks pretty sure he's going to land himself in serious crap just by responding. Slowly, he states, "Fromm suggested that sadists find release in control. Causing pain that cannot be defended against is one form, but only one. Absolute control is subjective, sir."

"You think I'm a sadist?" Harvey raises an eyebrow. He can't even tell if he feels insulted or not. On the one hand, the kid's pretty wrong and Harvey probably should be. On the other hand, Harvey doesn't believe in pathologizing sexual proclivities—unless they are clinically pathological, like, say, Van Kindt's—so technically, there's nothing to be offended by. On the third, mutant hand, Harvey can appreciate that

Mike's a little too fucked up to make assessments like that.

"I—" Mike's hands clutch at his jeans, the knuckles going white. "I don't know, sir. I don't know *anything*, sir."

This last clearly distresses him, in a way Harvey finds familiar. There's *nothing* Harvey hates more than going into a situation blind. It makes Harvey wonder: "Fromm, hm?"

"Erich Fromm, social psychologist, part of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, author of—" Mike cuts himself off.

Interesting. "Were you into psychology?"

The *before* lies between them. Mike shakes his head. "I was into books. Any, uh, all books. At first, I thought-- He, Master Van Kindt, he liked me to read, but. I thought that was good. It was all, it was about what he was going to do, about how I would react. And I told myself I wouldn't, that I knew, so I wouldn't, only—" Mike is shaking now, his arms wrapped around himself, like he might fly apart otherwise. "Sorry, that wasn't, you didn't ask that, sir."

*Jesus H.* Still, it's something, more than Harvey's had up to this point. The kid likes to read and he can retain at least some of what he reads, sensibly apply it to the facts as he knows them. It's suggestive of intelligence, which is a relief, because it means Harvey might be able to get Mike on his own two feet—and out of Harvey's hair—at some point. Harvey ignores the pang of something he refuses to identify at that thought. "Wanna read, kid?"

Mike looks at him then with eyes that are a wild mix of anticipation and stark terror. "Sir?"

"C'mon," Harvey says, getting up. "A law library is better than no library."

Mike blinks, but he stumbles up and follows Harvey out the office door.

\*

Watching Mike in the library is something of a revelation. The kid's fingers hover over the bindings, his lips moving quickly. If he's actually scanning titles, he's doing it very quickly. Within minutes the kid has found the section on buy-in/debt relief manumission processes. He gets the same look on his face as earlier and now, Harvey recognizes it: yearning.

Mike skips past the section, though, and plucks out "New York Civil Procedure Laws and Rules." He holds the book tight to his chest and turns to Harvey with something that is perilously, scandalously close to a smile. "Thank you. Thank you, sir."

Harvey thinks of telling him he can take the one on acquiring his freedom, but Mike looks genuinely happy, or the closest he has since Harvey won him in a game of chance, so Harvey lets things lie for the moment. "You won't be thanking me by the time you reach *Forum Non Conveniens*."

Mike doesn't say anything, just grips the book more tightly, and follows Harvey back.

\*

Around dinner time, Harvey actually looks over at Mike, and notices the kid has closed the book and is staring out the windows again. Harvey asks, "Get bored?"

Mike startles at the question, but then settles—or, what passes for settling in Mike's case—and answers, "I finished, sir."

"The chapter?" Harvey asks, because, sure it's been several hours, but that book is easily nine hundred pages long, probably more.

"The book, sir." After a second of silence, Mike adds, "I didn't read the indices. Sir."

Harvey gets up and strides to where Mike is sitting. Mike attempts to surreptitiously curl in on himself, clearly presenting a smaller target, but Harvey just grabs the book. Mike's eyes widen at that, and Harvey wonders if Mike actually thinks Harvey's going to hit him with something that could kill Mike on impact. Instead, Harvey flips to a random page, scans it and asks, "What happens if a municipality files a groundless appeal to secure the stay of a CPLR 5519(a)(1)?"

"The courts have found that to be a frivolous practice under Rule 130 – 1, and the municipality is subject to monetary sanctions, sir."

The answer is not only right, it's nearly word for word what's in the book. Harvey flips to another page. "Why were CPLR 5222 and other enforcement devices declared unconstitutional in 1982?"

"Failure to require notice to the judgment debtor about the possibly exempt status of her property and to advise the debtor about procedures to protect the exemptions, sir."

Harvey closes the book with a snap that causes Mike to jump again. He sets it down next to Mike. "Photographic memory, huh?"

Mike looks at the book for a long moment before nodding. "Yes, sir."

Thinking of the way Mike had quoted Harvey back to himself that once, despite the fact that Mike had been in emotional distress at the time Harvey was speaking to him, Harvey tilts his head. "Eidetic?"

Mike bites his lip, but there's another short nod. "Yes, sir."

If Harvey had that kind of ability, he'd probably shout about it to anyone within hearing distance. As it is, it's clear in every line of Mike's body that he expects the information to be used against him. To a certain extent, Harvey realizes, he's probably right, just not in whatever way Van Kindt went about it. "What's your favorite food?"

"Sir?"

"Pretty straightforward question." Now that Harvey knows the kid's smart, Mike's going to have to step up his game.

"I-- You like—"

"I know what I like. I'm asking what you like."

Mike looks down. "Junk food, sir. Burgers. Pizza."

"Which is your favorite? The burgers or the pizza?"

"Pizza, sir."

"Favorite toppings? No, wait, let me guess: pepperoni and hamburger?" Harvey rolls his eyes, but makes sure there's very little bite to the question

Harvey's ninety-nine percent sure that Mike is tempted to smile. Instead he says, "Good guess, sir."

\*

When they're seated in the garden at Franny's, Harvey with a pint of Sixpoint Craft and Mike with an Ithaca Root Beer, waiting for their respective pizzas, Harvey says, "So tell me how a guy with an eidetic memory and, at the very least, above average comprehension skills ends up as an Indebted."

Mike looks longingly at Harvey's glass. In the end, though, he asks, "If I didn't tell you, what would you do, sir?"

Figuring they're not really at the point where Harvey can make jokes about corporal punishment or denial of privileges, he answers honestly. "I'm not sure."

"What-- What are the options you're considering? Sir."

Harvey takes a long pull. "The more I know about you, the more I think I have a chance of figuring something out for you, finding a way out of this for both of us. The less I know, the more I think finding someone who knows how to take care of an Indebted is the best option."

Mike chokes on the sip of root beer he'd just taken and for several seconds, struggles to breathe. He's clearly not in dire peril, so Harvey stays where he is, waiting. Finally, when he has the breath, Mike asks, "You'd *sell* me?"

"There are responsible owners, you realize?" And Harvey knows he's telling the truth, but he can't help being discomfited by the all-too-familiar terror on Mike's face, and the far less familiar expression that hints of betrayal, or, at the very least, surprised hurt. "Kid—"

"A lot of stupid decisions, sir."

"Mike?"

"That's how someone with my skills ends up acting as a party favor at a golf tournament, or as human furniture after my owner's long day at work, or—"

"Mike," Harvey says, and it's soft, but gets Mike to stop talking. Mike's shaking, and without even knowing he's going to do it, Harvey presses his knees to Mike's under the table, folds his hands over Mike's. When the worst of the shaking has passed, Harvey says, "Start from the beginning, okay?"

This time, it really is a request.

\*

The pizza arrives, and Mike cuts into his, taking a slow couple of bites. Harvey doesn't rush him, instead concentrating on his own pizza. He's almost surprised by the time Mike speaks up. Mike's voice is thoughtful, as if he's not entirely sure where the beginning is, or as though he might have somehow missed it.

"I was in a car accident when I was nine. Head-on collision. I was in the backseat. The impact broke several ribs and my collarbone. They had to remove my spleen. But I survived. My parents were dead before the ambulance even arrived.

"My only living relative was my Gram, ah, maternal grandmother. She'd been thinking about retiring from her job as a secretary, but between the medical bills and the funeral bills and the expense of raising a kid, that wasn't an option any longer. She spent all of her savings on me and my parents and it still wasn't enough. Those first few years, I-- Well, I didn't really understand what a soup kitchen was at the time, I just kind of thought it was like a restaurant, but with more lines.

"Anyway, Gram, she had lived in this apartment pretty much since she was young and married. It'd been a nice part of town then, but things change. It was rent-controlled, though, and we couldn't afford to move anywhere, so we stayed. At school, I tended to get...picked on, for knowing the answer and being small."

Harvey hears the "beaten up" that "picked on" takes the euphemistic place of. He nods.

"That year, this kid, Trevor, he started standing up for me. And it was nice, to have a friend who was bigger and could get the others to lay off. It wasn't that big a deal to do something in return, like help with school."

Harvey narrows his eyes. "When you say 'help'—"

"I mean cheat," Mike confirms. "Did it all the time. I always knew exactly what he needed and could get away with having and nobody really pays attention in public schools like that. Not enough teachers. If you keep your head down, you're pretty much home free."

Harvey's actually well aware, but he doesn't say anything, just lets Mike keep talking.

"I got a scholarship to Macauley through Hunter. Full ride on tuition, room and board. Books and other expenses weren't covered, but I got a work study in the cafeteria. I—" Mike's lips form into a bitten off, stunted little smile. "It was amazing. I was double majoring in Econ and Poly Sci, minoring in Japanese. I thought—" He shakes his head.

"I was helping Gram with her bills. She'd had to quit her job because of her health by that time and she'd done everything for me. Things got pretty tight and Trevor had a crush on this girl who was worried about passing her Stats class and Trevor talked about how it was just going to be this one time and I was too damn ready to listen, because I still felt like I owed Trevor for his protection, and because I thought that was what friendship was, and because I wanted the money." Mike swallows.

"Because I was stupid and naïve, really."

"Got caught?" Harvey asks.

Mike's laugh isn't amused, it's sharp and short and sounds painful. "Lost my scholarship, so that was that. I took up odd jobs for a bit: pizza delivery, retail, whatever I could get. Then Gram's condition got worse and I couldn't take care of her, no matter how hard I tried. I started cheating as a business, because it meant I could hire help. But even that only worked for a bit.

"I found the nicest place I could for her, because I wasn't—she didn't let me go into the system and she could have. Instead she worked her whole life so I could have a home. I couldn't let her go somewhere awful. I let the lease up on the apartment and stayed on Trevor's couch for a few days, and then some shelters, and then wherever I could find a roof when it rained. But the bills just kept piling up and I got approached by a Broker."

Mike pushes his pizza away from him. "I said no at first. I did. But they threatened to send Gram to a state facility and I couldn't let that happen." He shrugs. "I named my financial terms and signed the dotted line."

Harvey signals for another beer. "What'd you tell your grandmother?"

Mike's face twists a little, like *this* was the hardest part, lying about what he'd done. "That I got hired by a company with offices in Japan. I can speak it pretty decently, even with only a couple of years. She's always believed in me and I think she *wanted* to believe, so it was easy." His tone belies this last statement. "I told her I'd write and I tried."

"Tried?"

"Mas-- Van Kindt caught me. I wasn't even telling her anything. It was all about the train systems in Japan, lies from stuff I'd read." Mike blinks and shudders a bit. "I didn't know a pen could go straight through a hand if there's enough pressure and speed. I mean, I guess if I'd thought about it in terms of physics—velocity times mass and all that—it makes sense, but I didn't know. It hurts. That—that hurts."

"Mike," Harvey says.

Mike shakes himself. "Like I said, sir. Lots of bad life decisions."

"Has she heard from you at all since you signed the contract?"

"No. No, sir. She must know I'm still alive. The bills are being paid. But I never—I should have tried again. I should have thought of something."

"He would have done worse."

"He did anyway, sir." Mike swallows. His eyes are wet, but he's not crying. "Do you think, that is, would you mind if I wrote her? I could say that with the earthquake and everything—I could find a way not to tell her, just to let her know I'm okay, that I didn't forget about her. I'd—I know the contract says I have to do anything, anyway, but I could give you ideas or act in a way you liked or, anything, really, if you'd just--"

Harvey honestly has no problem letting the kid write it with a fountain pen on company letterhead and having it hand delivered and sung to the woman, but he has a better idea. Of course, Mike doesn't need to know that. "I have stationary at my place."

"Thank you, *thank* you, sir." Mike's real smile, as it turns out, is simple and sweet and brilliant.

\*

In the morning, Harvey puts Mike in the car with him, like every morning. Unlike every other morning, he has Ray drive to the home where Mike's grandmother has been living for the better part of two years. Mike takes one look at where they've arrived and he's down on his knees. "No, no, please, *please*, sir, I can't—"

Harvey pulls Mike up and out of the car and gives Ray a half-hearted nod. Ray nods back and drives off. Mike is still pleading, promising things Harvey doesn't ever want to be promised, particularly not in front of a home for the elderly and infirm. "Shut up."

Mike shuts up. He's still got the following orders thing down pretty pat. The thought doesn't really amuse Harvey as much as he wishes it would. Harvey straightens Mike's shirt, even though it's a sweater, and there's really not much to straighten. "Here's the game plan: you're going to go in there and ask why you never got letters in response to yours. Obviously, she's going to say she never got yours. You're going to say something about the earthquake and the Japanese postal system.

"*Then* you are going to introduce your new boss. As far as she will know, my firm was representing your company and we hired you out from under them. You took the chance to come back to New York. Okay?"

"You—you're pretty good at this, sir." Mike still looks scared out of his mind, and likely to be mowed down by a wayward wheelchair.

"Lawyer," Harvey reminds him. "We're going to go visit your grandmother, now. Pull yourself together."

Mike pats his hair down and takes a breath. "Okay. I'm okay. Sir."

"Okay, then." Harvey walks inside. Mike will follow him.

\*

Harvey doesn't really do human connections. They have a tendency to end badly for him and he long ago decided that not engaging was the most efficient way of living his life. Normally, it's not much of a challenge. People as a general category don't hold that much interest for him. Jessica and Donna are both exceptions, but they also both allow him to pretend they're not, which helps enormously.

Seeing the expressions on Mike and his grandmother's face when Mike peers into the room, Harvey has a moment where he doesn't remember that feeling something will only get him in trouble in the long run. There's too much relief, too much gentleness, too much *love* in the older woman's expression, and there's too much of everything

written across Mike's face for Harvey to just turn that part of himself off.

Their hug is even worse: the two of them so gentle with each other, but neither wanting to let go. Mike's breaths start to come in gasps, and distantly, Harvey knows he's trying not to cry. Harvey starts talking, because it's easier, because that's what he does, because he can trust his own words, even if others can't.

He introduces himself and compliments Mike's work performance—Mike winces, but Harvey can't be concerned about that just now—and then says something about having to work and gets the hell out of Dodge. They deserve some time alone.

Harvey escapes into the bite of the early December air and calls Jessica. She picks up with, "How's the kid's grandmother?"

Harvey blinks. Then he catches up. "Donna?"

"Donna," Jessica confirms.

"She seems perfectly fine, in an old-person kind of way."

Jessica makes a sound of amusement. "And you?"

"Me?"

"Yourself, Harvey Specter?"

Harvey frowns. He should have called someone who doesn't know him as well. "I'm fine. I had a thought on the amicus Vigisera wants in the Panasonic case."

"Send me an email."

"Okay."

"And Harvey?"

"Yes?"

"Go back inside. It's freezing out there."

Harvey doesn't even ask how she knows. "I'm wearing my coat, mom."

"Inside," she repeats, and hangs up on him.

\*

Eventually, Harvey can't put off collecting his wayward...Mike anymore. (The word property doesn't sit well with him, even if it's technically true.) He goes back to the room he left over an hour before to find Mike sitting on the side of his grandmother's bed, their hands still caught up in each other's. They're laughing. It's the first time Harvey's heard Mike's real laugh.

He knocks on the door frame, and before he can stop himself finds that he's saying, "I'm sorry."

The grandmother—Mrs. Spence, Vivian, please—smiles and says, "Of



course. It's a week day, is it not? You probably need to be getting to the office."

Mike is already standing as Harvey says, "Unfortunately, yes."

Vivian asks, "You wouldn't have a few more minutes, would you? Mike, do you think you could find the nurse in physical therapy and ask her if she can come and reschedule? I need a nap after this morning."

Mike looks at Harvey, who nods imperceptibly. Mike says, "'Course, Gram. Be right back."

When Mike is gone, Harvey says, "And now for the vetting, I suppose?"

Vivian's smile turns sharp. "Of a sort. Where the hell has my grandson really been for almost eight months now, Mr. Specter? And why does he look like a war orphan?"

*Fuck.* Harvey has a lot of rules about how and when to lie and when not to. One of the more important ones is that if you get caught in a lie, and the truth is not an option, go with what is an option. "Mike got himself into some trouble. But he's out of it now."

Vivian's expression suggests that she is well aware of the vast amount going unstated. She doesn't press, though, just asks, "Is he in a position to *stay* out of it?"

"I plan to make sure of it, ma'am." The words are meant to be palliatives, easily said, not necessarily meant. Harvey is surprised to find that they feel like a promise. Harvey is a lot of things, but a promise-breaker is not one of them.

"I realize this must not seem very threatening, coming from a woman in her winter season in a building that smells of baked prunes, but if you do not, I will find you, and I will make you regret it in ways you never knew you could regret anything."

Threatening or not, Harvey believes her. For just a second, there's a part of him that is jealous of Mike. Then he remembers how utterly ridiculous that is. Harvey just repeats, "I will."

The smile is back then, and Vivian says, "Well, then. Good."

There's a beat and then Mike returns with the correct nurse. Harvey leaves him and Vivian to their goodbyes, but not before a whispered, "You can come back later this week."

Harvey cannot put enough distance between himself and the look of sheer gratitude that crosses Mike's face.

\*

Mike disappears for a full ten minutes a day after their second visit to his grandmother, and Harvey is just beginning to feel vaguely ill at ease when he shows back up with a cup of coffee and sets it on Harvey's desk. Harvey looks at the cup for a moment. "Did I want coffee?"

"You ran out an hour ago. On a normal morning, you'd have called Donna for a refill in less than twenty minutes. I thought this was... better. Sir."

Harvey takes a sip and ponders the fact that he's known Mike less than sixty days, but he can tell when the kid has something to say and doesn't think he's allowed. The coffee has a dash of half-and-half and no sugar, just the way Harvey takes it. Harvey's pretty sure Mike didn't ask Donna. Donna scares Mike. Well, everyone scares Mike, but Donna more than most. Harvey still has roughly ten hours of due diligence to plow through on the Kay-Cen merger and he's not really up for small talk. All the same, he finds himself saying, "Spit it out."

Mike looks to the side, his breathing come fast and a little rough, but he says, "New York State Bar Professional Standards for Attorney's Rule 5.3 allows for non-lawyers to work for lawyers so long as the non-lawyer is properly supervised. Rule 5.5 allows the hiring on non-legal professionals in certain capacities."

Once upon a time, Harvey took the bar, and all related materials. He knows this. "Yes."

"Federal Code for Owners of Indebted Entities Rule 1.3 states that those Persons who have sold whole interest in themselves to eradicate former debt have the privileges of citizenship and personhood revoked. Rule 7.6 states—"

"That he who has bought full interest in such entity takes on responsibility for the decisions and actions of his property, legal or otherwise." Harvey pays attention to the things he needs to know, thanks.

Mike swallows. "Arguably, if my personhood cannot be separated from yours, then I have the same duties of confidentiality to your clients, as well as any other professional responsibilities you have taken on. Even if I do not, *Cradell v. Tandeschi* established Second Circuit precedent that mere ownership is presumptive of appropriate supervision."

Harvey raises an eyebrow. He knows perfectly well where Mike is going, but he thinks it's probably a good idea to make Mike do the heavy lifting. His confidence muscles have atrophied to an actual negativity of existence. Mike says, "You know what I can do, sir. Let me help. Please."

Harvey appreciates that Mike doesn't beg or cower. He shakes, and Harvey's pretty sure Mike's getting lightheaded from the way he's still breathing, but he holds his own. It's progress. In fact, if the psychological professional Jessica recommended he ask his questions knows anything—and Harvey's confident Jessica would not send him to someone who was not a leader in the field—Mike's progress is nothing short of startling. All the same, Harvey makes a mental note to have Donna schedule an appointment for Mike with said Dr. Teng.

Harvey looks at the pile of paperwork on his desk and then back at Mike. "You really want to?"

"Yes. Yes, sir."

The answer is too quick, too filled with bitten-off hope to be anything but true. Still, "Why?"

Mike looks at him then, blinking. "Sir?"

Harvey leans back. "Is it because you need to feel helpful or useful to

reassure yourself I won't sell you and since I'm not into coerced sexual acts, this is your only option? Is it because you're on the precipice of Stockholm Syndrome? What?"

To his surprise—and evidently to Mike's surprise—Mike mutters, "I'm pretty sure I've fallen right off *that* precipice."

They look at each other then and Mike says, "Oh. Shit." Then, "I mean —"

Harvey laughs. He can't even help it. Mike's panic isn't funny, really, nor is the situation, but Harvey's needed a little stress relief for a while now. When the first wave of his amusement passes, he asks, "So is that it?"

"No," Mike answers, shaking his head. He looks to be caught between laughter and hiding under the desk, possibly while offering Harvey a mid-day blowjob. Instead, he pulls himself together and says, "All of that, yes. But also...I like to read. I like to think. I just want to, I guess."

Harvey likes that answer. He takes the file he would have moved onto next and passes it to Mike. "You know what I'm doing here?"

Mike nods. "Yes, sir."

"Good," Harvey says, and goes back to his own work.

\*

Two weeks later, Harvey comes back from a meeting to tell Mike that the paperwork omission the kid had caught had given all the leverage they'd needed to force a settlement and finds Mike not in the office. At first, Harvey checks behind his desk and a couple of other hiding spots that Mike has cultivated in his months at Pearson Hardman, but no, Mike really is not in Harvey's office. Harvey walks to his door and says, "Donna—"

"Not that this is really a defense of the highest caliber, but I swear all I did was go to lunch. As I sometimes do." Donna's tone is calm, dry, but she looks upset.

Since the idea that Mike walked away from his contract for any reason at this point is patently ludicrous, Harvey asks, "Where is he?"

"Jessica's office."

For a second, Harvey's heart stops. But he's told Jessica about what the kid's been doing, and so far, there haven't been any road bumps. Well, okay, Harvey's never having Mike draft another Motion to Set Aside—Harvey had nearly choked to death on his coffee at Mike's (shockingly dead-on) description of former counsel's inadequacies—but Harvey fixed that by the time anyone else saw it.

As such, Harvey's pretty sure he's not in trouble with Jessica. He really doesn't like the options he's still left with anymore than that one. He asks Donna, "Should I collect him?"

"You should read this," Donna says in answer, putting a print out in front of him. "Rachel found it. I asked her to find it."

One page is the section on appropriate measures of supervision required by owners of Indebted Entities. The second speaks to the legal rights of full persons in relation to an unsupervised Indebted Entity. There aren't many limits on the latter: it's basically boilerplate you-break-it-you-pay-to-fix-it language.

Harvey takes the papers and walks to Jessica's office. He can't see Mike when he walks in the door, but Jessica's eyes flicker to behind her couch, and sure enough, Mike's curled up back there, rocking a little even as he works on a brief. Harvey asks, "Needed a change of scenery? Or just looking to climb the ranks?"

Mike startles and the highlighter he's using goes flying. His moves to recover it are frantic and uncoordinated and Harvey's a little concerned about Jessica's carpeting. He finds himself getting to the floor and stilling Mike with a hand. He puts the cap on the highlighter and sets it aside. When the immediate danger is past, Harvey asks, "What happened?"

Mike shakes his head. "Nothing, sir."

"Donna doesn't get upset over nothing. Nor does she call up favors from the paralegals for it."

"She's upset?" Mike asks, looking concerned.

"So if you don't tell me, I'm just going to ask her, and you haven't seen how Donna likes to re-enact things."

Mike looks properly chastised. "It was *nothing*. Mr. Litt came to your office while Donna was at lunch. He needed help with some briefs. Section 17.4 of the—"

"I know what it says." Harvey does. He just read Rachel's print out of it. Being unsupervised, Mike had no choice but to go with Louis, unless he suspected Louis of attempting to damage Harvey's property.

"So I went to help him with the briefs. Sir."

Mike is still clutching his knees to his chest and along the line of his neck Harvey notices—"Is that a *bite*?"

"Section 17.7—"

"Shut the fuck up with the laws, Mike, did Louis bite you?"

"No," Mike blinks. "No, I was helping the associates."

Harvey doesn't like being angry. It's far too close to hurt or sad for his tastes. That said, Harvey is *pissed*. "Was it all of them?"

"Do we have to talk about this? I don't want to talk about it."

Harvey doesn't necessarily want to talk. There are a lot of other things he wouldn't mind doing. "How many?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. They didn't cause recoverable damages, sir."

Harvey takes a breath, then another. "Mike, I want you to go back to

my office. If anyone other than Donna so much as *looks* at you, punch them."

"Rule 9.4, an Indebted Entity shall be presumed guilty in any altercation between it and a legalized person. Reparations may include —"

Harvey's done. "Rule 9.17, an Indebted Entity's owner is entitled to claim legal responsibility for his property's actions and behaviors. He may, at any time, choose to take upon himself the legal repercussions of activities performed at his behest. In summation: Punch. Them."

Mike gets to his feet. He looks at Harvey for a bit, but then he relents. "Punching. Okay, sir."

\*

Harvey turns to Jessica. "I realize that I'm not precisely the standard bearer for basic human morality, but seriously, these are the people we're hiring here nowadays?"

"I just fired two of them, if it makes you feel any better."

"Two?" Harvey asks.

"The two I caught in the act."

That catches Harvey off-guard. "They were molesting him in the associate's area? Out in the open?"

"My gut feeling is that he went to the bathroom at some point and few of them followed him in there. Once he came out...it seemed to mostly be unwanted touching and verbal abuse, but I've no idea what happened before I got there."

Harvey closes his eyes for a couple of seconds. Things had been getting better, *Mike* had been. It had all been little things, like dropping the 'sir' most of the time, or asking questions without seeming like it was the most terrifying thing he'd ever had to do, but still, better. When Harvey opens his eyes he says, "Tell Louis to leave him alone. He's not the firm's, he's *mine*. I'll take care of the legal supervisory issues, but I swear to all that I hold true, Jessica, if I find out he's gone *near* Mike—"

"I'll take care of it."

It's hard to hold onto his anger in the face of Jessica's calm competence, the way she seems to get him. It's even harder when she says, "I'm sorry this happened."

Harvey looks over, out the window, getting lost in the skyline for a moment. "Thanks for..."

"Go back to your office," she says softly. It's not a command. It's permission.

\*

Mike runs when he can't sleep. Harvey long ago gave him permission to just go, and the keys to get wherever he needed. The frequency,

though, has picked up since Harvey tagged him, the evening of the Associate Incident, as Harvey mentally refers to it. Following Rule 17.2—an Indebted Entity identified as in ownership by way of tag, collar, marking, or alternately approved means is considered to be under supervision even in the absence of its owner—Harvey had taken Mike to his customary jeweler.

Mike hadn't really been in a place to choose which ID bracelet Harvey bought, but he had cajoled the kid into choosing silver over gold and picking a font in which to engrave Harvey's name, cell phone number, and address. Harvey hates the damn thing, but Mike never wears his shirtsleeves past it and seems to be more willing to venture out of the office or condo now that he has it. Harvey wishes Mike had known he could have just asked for a mark of ownership. He knows that's ridiculous.

But Mike's left the condo every day for the past six—that of the Associate Incident—to run. Harvey can't sleep through the kid slipping through the front door. Most nights, every night until now, Harvey has just turned over and gone back to sleep. Mike will come back. But Mike's starting to look a little worn around the edges, to be a little slow to answer when Harvey asks a question.

Harvey grabs a pair of sweatpants and goes down to the gym. There's only one key, so he has to knock on the glass. Mike comes over and lets him in. "Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to wake you."

Harvey doesn't say anything, just gets on the treadmill next to Mike's, and starts himself at a warming-up pace. "Let's talk about the sleeping pills."

Mike stumbles and almost falls off his treadmill, but recovers just in time. "I-- I'd really rather not, sir. Please."

Harvey considers his options. In the end, he really does believe Mike has the right not to say anything, if he doesn't want to. On the other hand, the kid's going to kill himself through sleep deprivation if this keeps up. Which, technically, is also Mike's right, but Harvey can't countenance that.

In the silence, Mike repeats, "Please, sir."

"Tell you what: I'll give you a choice. You can tell me, and we can figure out something to do about it, or I can come run with you every night."

Mike picks up his speed, like he's miraculously going to get somewhere that is not the condo gym, next to Harvey. Eventually, he says, "You need to sleep, sir."

"So do you."

Mike runs hard for several minutes and Harvey lets him. He's not going to force the choice. When Mike is panting and can barely keep up with the machine, he slows it down, slower and slower until he's stopped. "Okay. I'll-- I'll explain, sir."

"Fantastic," Harvey says, stopping his treadmill and getting off. "C'mon. There's scotch upstairs."

\*

Mike clearly hasn't had alcohol in a while. Probably not since he stopped sleeping and lost so much weight. Harvey's not sure Mike's ever had scotch. He blanches at the first sip and is already loosening up by the third. Harvey takes the glass from him after the fifth. He wants Mike relaxed, not comatose. That can come later.

Mike looks longingly at the glass and says, sincerely, "That's good, sir."

"Mm," Harvey says, and conscientiously does not laugh. It's big of him.

Mike takes a breath. "I was, at times, an investment for him. Master Van Kindt. People who can't afford an Indebted, they'll pay decent money to use one."

*Right, then.* Harvey thinks that should have been obvious. It wasn't. It makes the feeling he has in his stomach when he thinks about the associates getting their hands on Mike just that much sharper. "He pimped you out."

Mike nods. "There was this one...client—"

"John," Harvey says tightly. "And from now on, we're calling Van Kindt Pimp Daddy Asshole in the comfort of our own home, all right?"

"Pimp Daddy Asshole?"

"It's three forty five in the morning and there aren't words in the English language for what I'd actually like to call him."

"Okay, sir. Okay, I mean, anyway, there was this John. He liked his partners comatose. At first, when I started being ordered to take the pills, I kind of thought it was better. Because at least I didn't have to be awake for it. Only, when I'd wake up I'd never know where I was and didn't know why I hurt the way I did and it shouldn't have been any scarier than anything else, but it—it was."

Harvey can't imagine that kind of loss of control, but he doesn't doubt Mike's word for a minute.

"Then, I mean, Van-- Can I just say Pimp? It's shorter."

"Fine." Harvey waves a hand.

"He would tape them. The sessions."

Of *course* he would. Harvey doesn't think about touching Mike in front of the man. He doesn't need anything else making his skin crawl at this moment.

"And make me watch. Make me, I don't know how to...participate, again. Only with him, this time. Listening to him, doing what he said."

Harvey closes his eyes for a second. "Okay."

"And then, I mean, I thought I'd gotten used to it? Only, the nightmares started and you can't wake up on one of those pills, you're just *stuck*. Johns with comatose kinks don't like it when the body won't lie still or shut up, I guess."

*The body.* Harvey finishes Mike's scotch off. He'll pour them both

another one.

"Van Pimp actually got a doctor for me that time. I think there was too much damage not to. He'd've had to pay Gram's bills whether I died or not."

"Van Pimp," Harvey murmurs. "You're not clever."

Mike's expression is solemn. "No. No, sir. I know."

Harvey gets up and pours both of them another couple of fingers. He tells Mike, "Take it slow."

Mike takes the glass in his hand but doesn't drink. "I—I don't know if it'll make me sick. In the morning."

"You wouldn't be the first person to have a hangover. Unless you've got PTSD around those, too?" Harvey isn't entirely sure he's kidding.

"Not—not hangovers, sir."

"But?"

"I got the flu once." Mike's fingers tighten on the glass. "He...made me clean up after myself."

Harvey never, ever wants to know what lies in those ellipses. Mike is shaking too hard to hold the damn glass, so Harvey takes it from him and holds it to his lips. "Drink, Mike. If something needs cleaning, I've got a service for that."

Mike takes a sip, and then another, when Harvey tips the glass again. Slowly, at Harvey's speed, Mike finishes the drink. His eyes are drifting shut, but he keeps forcing them open, mumbling apologies. Harvey pushes him down on the couch and covers him in a throw. "Sleep, kid."

Harvey turns off the lights in the living room and puts the glasses in the kitchen sink. Then he leaves the condo. He needs to run.

\*

Harvey makes two calls in the morning: one to Donna to tell her he's working from home, and another to Dr. Teng's office to set up an appointment. Harvey can't make Mike talk to her, but he can make Mike sit in a room with her. He has to hope that will be enough.

Mike finally wakes up sometime around two and stumbles into Harvey's home office, blinking owlishly, clutching the blanket around himself, and sporting the most violent bed-head Harvey has ever seen in a long lifetime of one-night stands. Something clenches in Harvey's stomach. He wonders if Stockholm Syndrome works both ways.

Mike pads to Harvey's side and slips down onto his knees, with a murmured, "Sir?"

Harvey says, "There's a chair, Mike. Sit in it."

Mike does. He fidgets for a few moments and then asks, "Can I help, sir?"



"Go take a shower. You can stay casual, we're working from here today. Order us lunch?"

"What do you want, sir?"

*You to take some initiative.* "Surprise me. My card is in my wallet on my nightstand."

"Yes, sir." Mike stands and walks to the door, but he stalls there.

Harvey gives it a couple of seconds before looking up. "Something wrong?"

"You— you could have left me here, sir. There'd be no point to me stealing and I can take care of myself. You don't have to worry."

"Your definition of taking care of yourself leaves something to be desired, but aside from that, believe me when I say I know precisely what I do and do not have to do, Mike."

Mike tilts his head slightly, but then says, "Yes, sir," and walks out of the room.

Harvey goes back to his work, the white noise of the water running more calming than it should be.

\*

At Mike's first session, Harvey reads through the paperwork Dr. Teng is requiring that Harvey sign before she takes Mike as a client. Harvey gets to the part where he has to sign away his right to all confidential medical information in relation to Mike—in other words, she's not going to tell Harvey what Mike is saying in sessions—and tells her, "You realize there isn't a court of law in which this is enforceable, right?"

"I do," she says calmly. "I depend on the better angels of persons who care enough for their Indebteds to bring them to me."

"I *care* enough to get him back on his feet so that I don't have a charge anymore."

Beside him, Mike flinches. Harvey kind of wishes he could take it back, which only pisses him off more. He tamps down on all errant feelings.

Dr. Teng smiles. "I say potato, and all that."

Harvey rolls his eyes and signs. He hadn't been planning on infringing the kid's privacy rights anyway. He tells Mike, "See you in an hour. Don't give the doctor any trouble."

Mike's gaze follows him all the way out the door. It's a fucking bitch to walk out. Harvey thinks longingly that he needs some adult play time. Instead he goes to the upscale lounge a block down and works on some briefs Mike has gotten started for him. His phone chirps at him to tell him his hour is up and he goes back.

Mike walks out of the room as Harvey arrives. Harvey hands him a file and says, "Proof."

To Dr. Teng he says, "Have a moment?"

Mike looks at him with uncertain eyes from where he has settled with the file. Harvey asks, "What, I'm not allowed to have mental trauma?"

Dr. Teng makes an amused noise, but she inclines her head and invites him in. Her first words after closing the door are, "If this is in regard to what he told me, you really will have to drag me to court. And if you really are seeking my professional guidance, you'll have to make your own appointment, or better yet, see someone with less of a conflict of interest."

"Neither," Harvey tells her. "Not in the way you're suggesting, in any case."

"Continue."

"In your professional opinion, can he be rehabilitated?"

"How do you define rehabilitation?"

Fair. Harvey likes precise people. "Able to handle manumission, living on his own, supporting himself, defending himself against others."

"Very likely, but it will take time, and no, I cannot give you an estimated time. Every person is different."

"What do I need to be doing?"

Dr. Teng considers him for a moment. "What are you willing to do?"

Harvey doesn't like admitting it, but this woman clearly takes confidentiality very seriously, and he needs help. Mike and he can't keep going the way they're going, someone is going to collapse. Harvey's invested in it not being him. "I don't know."

She nods slowly. "Okay, then let's start with the basics. You need to push him to make his own decisions. Even small stuff, like what pair of shoes to wear, or whether he wants to drink decaf or regular. It's going to be a complete pain in the ass for a while. Sooner or later, if he keeps coming and we keep working, he's going to start getting past fear and into anger. He's going to lash out. It will likely be cruel and unfair and largely focused on you. Let it happen. Let it happen for long enough that when you eventually decide to yell back, it doesn't shut him down."

After a moment of silence, Harvey asks, "That's it?"

"Neither of those are going to feel small, believe me. And yes, for now, that's it."

"Then Mike will see you again in four days."

She smiles. "Until then."

\*

It becomes apparent very quickly that Dr. Teng wasn't exaggerating when she had predicted that forcing Mike to make decisions would annoy the crap out of Harvey. He starts with the decaf or regular suggestion, because it seems so easy, so *simple*. He asks Mike which he

prefers before Donna goes on the morning coffee run and Mike blinks at him four times before responding, "Whatever you wish me to drink, sir."

"I *wish* you to make a decision, is what I wish."

It takes Mike a solid minute to get to a place where he can stutter out, "R-regular," and Harvey's not even sure if that's an actual preference, or a guess at what Harvey would prefer him drink.

Harvey asks, "Milk or sugar?"

Mike's expression falls somewhere between utter betrayal and rampant desperation. "Neither, sir?"

Harvey's been giving it to Mike with milk and sugar, so despite the question-like state of the response, he's pretty sure that's an actual answer. "Small, medium or large?"

Mike swallows. "M-medium, sir."

One decision down, and Harvey feels like he's run an emotional marathon. He tells himself it will get better, but the next day he hasn't laid Mike's suit out for him and for his efforts he gets a naked Mike, offering himself up, unsure of what he's done wrong to affect such a change in his position, but eager and willing to rectify it.

Harvey pulls him up by his elbow, walks him to his own closet and goes through every necessary choice from which suit, to which pair of socks. In the end, Mike is dressed in an outfit of his own choosing, or as much so as he can be when Harvey bought all the suits in his wardrobe. They'll have to work on that, too, but not until Harvey thinks Mike can manage without offering fellatio as penance.

It goes on like this for weeks until one morning—a Sunday—Harvey takes them to brunch. Mike orders pancakes without looking to Harvey for approval and then decides between the maple syrup and the boysenberry. Mike's halfway through the meal when he looks up, startled for a second.

Harvey doesn't pause while cutting his eggs. "Well done, kid."

Mike's grin is wide and uncontrolled. Harvey's glad they're going over to the home after breakfast; Mrs. Spence should get to see him like this for once. Mike goes back to devouring his pancakes. His, "Yes, yes, sir," is very quiet. Harvey hears.

\*

The first time Mike gets angry, Harvey's not sure who's more surprised: him or Mike. It's over quickly, probably within less than two minutes, and by the time it's done, Harvey can't even remember what Mike was upset about, because he goes from *pissed* to *more scared than Harvey's ever seen him*, ever in the space of .5 seconds.

Mike's on the floor, his hands wrapped over his head, in as much of a ball as he can manage, keening. Literally, there's nothing coherent coming out of him, just sounds. Harvey swears under his breath, because of course this had to happen at the office, of course it did. Then he does the only thing he can think of to do under the circumstances:

sits down by Mike and says softly, "Hey kid, hey. It's okay. You're out of practice. You didn't even say anything mean."

He didn't either. It was mostly a lot of sputtered yells and possibly a hint of "do it yourself" somewhere, but it wasn't mean or unfair of any of the things normal people are when fighting. Harvey's words, however, aren't penetrating. He's about to give up and put an emergency call into Dr. Teng when Mike's breathing finally slows down and the noises quiet. He's still rocking himself, though, and Harvey has the sense Mike's gone quiet more out of a sense of self-preservation than any real desire to stop wailing.

Harvey stares ahead and says to his desk, "Well, I know it didn't feel like it, but I'm pretty sure we can count that as progress."

Mike's voice shakes as he forces out, "S-sorry, sir."

Harvey frowns. "Don't apologize. Not for this, at least."

Mike uncurls the tiniest bit. His eyes are puffy and his face is streaked with drying tears. "I-I'm not s-sure I can do this. Sir."

"You can," Harvey tells him. "You might not *want* to, but you can."

Mike looks at him, then. The kid's pupils are still blown, but he's focused. "Is it—is it so bad? Having me?"

Harvey has had time to imagine a lot of ways for these types of conversations to go. This approach was not on the list. "What?"

"That's the point, correct? I get better so that you can get rid of me." There's no anger in the statement; that's gone as quickly as it came. Mike is just stating a fact as he understands it.

Harvey thinks over his response carefully. Finally he asks, "Do you not remember what it was like before you signed the contract?"

"I remember," Mike says flatly.

"When you got to make your own decisions and...and do your own thing?"

"When I was starving and desperate and alone most of the time? Back then?" Mike asks softly. "I remember, sir."

Harvey's jaw tightens to the point of pain. "It won't be like that, kid."

The look in Mike's eyes tells Harvey that Mike would laugh at this moment if he had it in him. Instead he says, "You didn't answer my question."

Harvey thinks about making Mike repeat the question, but as much as he might love a good head-game when he's doing his job, he's not about to do that to Mike. "It's not bad at all, Mike. But I'm vain enough to want you here because you want to be here, not because I'm the best option in a sea of poor ones."

"It's not like that," Mike protests, but there's uncertainty in his voice.

Harvey uses it against him. "You've got no idea what it's like."

It takes Mike a long time to respond. "I know you make me feel safe."

Harvey ignores the part of himself that wants to soak up that statement and keep it at his own. "Except for when I terrify you."

"You make it sound like it's simple, like there aren't other considerations when I'm panicking."

"No, Mike. I know it's not. But I also know that my presence still causes you to panic, even if it's only one motivating factor."

Mike closes his eyes, looking exhausted to his very core. "I hate that you always win, sir."

Harvey's starting to question how much he enjoys it, if he's being honest. Not that Mike need know that. "It's a burden, always being right."

"I don't believe you," Mike mumbles. "Sir."

"Kid."

"Mm?"

"Couch. Before you fall asleep." Sitting on his office floor is one thing, and Harvey's not thrilled about that. Mike isn't sleeping there.

"Mm," Mike responds and clearly tries to move. In the end, Harvey isn't surprised to find himself mostly-carrying Mike to his destination.

\*

Harvey takes Mike to Vivian's over the dinner hour and leaves to eat so that they can have some time alone. He'll get Mike something on the way back to the office.

He takes a little longer than he generally would and doesn't rush back. When he arrives, it's to find Mike all-but on the bed with his grandmother, curled up against her as much as possible. Vivian clears her throat upon seeing Harvey and Mike startles and draws back, flushing and refusing to look at Harvey. Vivian says, "Michael, would you—"

"Go somewhere so you and he can talk about me behind my back?" Mike asks. He kisses her forehead. "Yes, ma'am."

She grins after him. "That's the good boy I raised."

Harvey notices the way Mike straightens a little at the words. When he's out of the room, Vivian motions to a chair. "Have a seat."

Harvey sits. Vivian takes a while just to look at him. Harvey's glad he got over being easily intimidated in high school. Finally, she says, "My grandson is looking much better."

"He is," Harvey agrees, because agreement is safe and he doesn't know where this conversation is going.

"Explain something to me, Mr. Specter."

"Harvey," Harvey offers, mostly because he feels like he's being scolded when she uses his title and last name.

"Harvey, then. Back when I was out amongst the living, people's bosses didn't take them everywhere, let alone make sure they visited their ailing guardians. I am hard pressed to believe so much has changed."

Harvey sometimes fantasizes that he has Donna along with him at moments such as this, to act as his bodyguard and press secretary. He will never tell her this. He bites back a sigh and admits, "Not so much."

"So who are you, then, Harvey?"

"I *am* his boss." Harvey started putting a salary in a trust the week Mike started working for him. He pays him at the rate of a paralegal, since anything else might seem a little suspicious.

"And?" she prompts.

Harvey could tell her the truth. It's his right. But it's not his to tell and he knows it. Instead he goes with, "He's staying with me right now. While he gets on his feet. We're...close."

She snorts. "Not that close."

Harvey finds himself saying, "Sorry?"

"My grandson is touch-starved. You live with him and you haven't noticed, so either you're emotionally challenged, or you just don't pay that much attention to him. I was giving you the benefit of the doubt and going with the second, since he seems to think you're a good man, and you brought him back to me, but I'm reserving judgment."

Harvey stares. "Mike's not—"

Honestly, until this moment, Harvey's been operating on the theory that the *last* thing Mike needs is Harvey touching him in any way. But now that Vivian has pointed it out, a million little clues wiggle their way into his mind, times when Mike's waited just a second too long to pull away when being handed files, or brushed by Harvey a little closer than necessary in the hallways. Huh.

Vivian raises an eyebrow. Harvey squares his jaw. "I'm doing the best by him that I know how to, Mrs. Spence." He hates that he feels as though it matters what she thinks.

"*That*, I believe."

\*

Harvey puts Mike in his office and goes to Jessica's to make a phone call. She's in there, but that's fine, it'll save Harvey having to explain everything twice. He sits on her couch and ignores her, "Did I invite you?" face, listening to the ringing of his phone. Dr. Teng picks up on the third ring and says, "These are not normal business hours."

"I'll pay time and a half."

"Mike okay?"

"His grandmother says he's touch starved."

After a pause, Dr. Teng responds, her tone careful. "That's not unusual in cases like this. It's a hard thing to predict. Some persons recovering from this kind of trauma don't want to be touched at all, and others crave positive touch. The problem is, it's not at all related to what they were like before the trauma, so it's not something I could ask about and get a straight answer to. If his grandmother's reading it that way, she's probably right."

Harvey runs a hand over his face. "What am I supposed to do here?"

He's well aware Jessica is listening, and even watching while pretending she's not. Harvey looks straight at her and mouths, "Don't laugh, you're next."

Jessica laughs and murmurs, "Bring it."

Dr. Teng asks, "Not the touchy-feely type, huh?"

"No." Harvey has his reasons, has learned all about reaching out and getting bitten or swatted or just plain laughed at for his efforts. But what's important is that he hasn't touched others in years if not for sex, which is straightforward and easy and makes sense, and wherein he has taught himself all the signs that others have, their yeses and nos.

"Okay," she says softly. "I would start with small things: a hand to his shoulder, or back, a knee pressed to his. He's going to pull away at first, because he's not used to touch being good anymore, no matter how much he wants that. But once he stops he'll start giving you cues to when he wants more. Try and let him take the lead. This is as good a place to start as any, really."

"What if he—" Harvey hesitates. "He doesn't always move toward what he wants, so much as what he thinks I want."

"If he tries anything sexual, shut it down. You're right that he's not ready to make those decisions. Other than that, go with it. He *needs* to make mistakes, if for no other reason than to learn that he won't be brutalized for them."

Harvey takes a breath, then another. He doesn't let himself feel the discomfort that wants to settle in between his shoulder blades at being Mike's guinea pig: it's stupid and inappropriate, and not at all like Harvey Specter. He says, "Okay. We'll try that. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Just call if anything goes wrong."

"Is it likely to?"

"Humans are strange animals. Traumatized ones more than most."

Harvey can *hear* her shrug. He wishes he could find the same disconnect with this that he can with everything else. "All right. Have a good evening."

"Night, Harvey."

Harvey hangs up and looks at Jessica, who's no longer bothering to hide that she's staring at him. He gives her a rueful look. "Just say it."

"Say what?"

"Whatever it is you're waiting to say about my ineptitude at humanity or biting off more than I could chew or—"

"I'm proud of you."

Those four words bring Harvey up short. "Or-- Sorry?"

She stands. "You heard me."

He nearly backs up as she walks toward him, thrown by her openness, by the fact that he's done something worthy of praise that didn't involve pleasing a client. "Jessica."

She stops just in front of him, the two of them nearly eye to eye, her just a little bit taller, always. She runs a finger along his hairline, as if pushing some off his face, except there's nothing to clear away, of course, Harvey is careful to make sure every strand stays in its place. He almost flinches from her, uncertain of what this is. He doesn't, though, lets her cup his cheek and hold him in place for a moment. She tells him, "You can do this, kid."

In that moment, it's the easiest thing in the world for Harvey to believe her. She's always had that power over him. He would stay in the moment if he thought it feasible, but he knows better. He takes her hand and kisses it, unsure of why, but certain it's the right thing to do. Her smile is soft and knowing.

He says, "Thanks," and leaves her office—and the moment—behind.

\*

Harvey comes up with the idea on the way back to his office. It's not precisely in line with what Dr. Teng suggested, but he feels more confident about it, and Harvey has long since stopped questioning his instincts. He pops his head in his office and asks Mike, "Do you play basketball?"

Mike looks up at him, blinking owlshly. "Um. I've played. Before. Sir."

"Feeling up to a little one-on-one?"

Mike sets aside the file he's been holding onto and says, "I wasn't very good, sir. And I—my endurance is pretty shot."

Harvey's starting to hear the things Mike doesn't say, the places where Mike is telling Harvey that he can't be any good for him. "It's just a game, kid."

The look on Mike's face makes Harvey want to turn away, but he doesn't. Mike tries a smile, instead, and says, "Okay."

Harvey says, "C'mon."

\*

It's a challenge to get Mike to actually play. As uncertain as the thought



of not giving Harvey a good game was, evidently the idea of possibly scoring against him or knocking him down is all-out terrifying. But Harvey hasn't gotten to where he is by just accepting what others give him. He knows how to get what he wants. And he *wants* Mike to knock him down, to throw shots, to *play*.

Harvey plays aggressively as a general rule, but even moreso with just Mike there, because it's as good an excuse as any to have an arm across Mike's chest or slide up against his back without it being about sex. Not that Harvey hasn't gone there a few times after a game, but the other player has always been up for it, been signaling. Now it's just about them, and the court, and making points in the paint. (Harvey's actually better at threes, but guarding a three doesn't take as much contact, and Harvey's not worried about his point count, not just now.)

Slowly, Mike loses his reluctance, and then it's *fun*, even if Mike really isn't quite at Harvey's level. It's clear to Harvey that they learned in the same kind of places: back alleys and run down courts off the side of noisy streets.

Mike scores a two-pointer, a nice little under-the-rim shot that barely gets by Harvey, and the look of pride on this face is something Harvey wishes he could have a picture of; even moreso when it doesn't immediately disappear, and when Mike is *on* him for the return trip down the court.

They only stop when Mike can barely move. Harvey herds him into the showers, grateful that the firm's gym has separate showering facilities. He's pretty sure Mike's not up for that level of skin just yet, touching or not.

Harvey orders them Dominican when they get back up to the office, and pays a delivery service to go pick it up, since there isn't a Dominican place worthy of the name that will deliver to the office at nearly midnight. Mike says, "I've never eaten Dominican."

Harvey tells him, "I'll start you off easy."

Mike falls asleep on the couch, getting the file he's working on crumpled and all over the place. Harvey's not too worried. The kid'll remember where everything is supposed to go.

Harvey wakes him when the food gets there, and stuffs him with mang<sup>◆</sup>, chulitos and chicharr<sup>◆</sup> de pollo. When they've demolished the totality of the order, Mike looks at the empty plates and says wistfully, "A glass of chocolate milk would be really good right now."

Mike looks up then, as if remembering Harvey's there and says, "I don't-- I didn't-- That wasn't." He smacks himself in the forehead and says, "Thank you for dinner, sir. It was good."

Harvey makes a mental note to add a thing of chocolate Ronnybrook to his next grocery order. "Go back to sleep."

Mike yawns as he says, "I can help."

Harvey rolls his eyes and pushes Mike back down on the couch. He keeps his hands pressed flat—but not hard—to Mike's chest for just a couple of seconds longer than necessary. He's pretty sure he's not imagining the way Mike arches into them just a touch. Then he pulls the blanket Donna brought into the office that first week over Mike's

shoulders and repeats, "Go back to sleep."

An hour later, when Harvey glances over, Mike's smiling in his sleep.

\*

Getting started touching Mike in simple ways is actually the hardest part of the whole process. Harvey finally just forces the issue two mornings after their impromptu basketball match and squeezes Mike's shoulder while saying, "Gotta go," on their way out of the condo.

Mike flinches under the touch, but he also runs to catch up to Harvey and lets their knees brush once they're in the car. After that, it's like anything else Harvey has ever set his mind to: often two steps backward for every one forward, but somehow the necessary progress keeps getting made.

Harvey finds that it helps for him to have predictable moves. Mike will shrink away when Harvey surprises him, but if Harvey sets up a normative touch, such as a pat to the elbow while handing Mike papers, Mike waits for it, leans into it. So it is that they find a rhythm of choreographed touches, basketball games at least twice a week, and the occasional offhand touch, since Harvey thinks Mike needs to get used to accepting those, too.

One of the junior partners gets strep, and, as always, the office turns into a cesspit of living bacteria, largely because the associates know better than to skip work unless they are comatose and on a drip-feed at the nearest hospital. Harvey stops touching Mike because contact breeds infection and Harvey has survived enough of these rounds unscathed—with the help of Donna's timely appearances with vitamin C supplements and disinfectant wipes, always—to know what must be done.

This particular round seems to take an unusually, annoyingly long time to sort itself, with no less than three of the associates coming down with mono—one of them passing out in the damn hall—and Jessica's PA having to take leave for bronchitis. All in all, Harvey really isn't taking any chances.

Mike accepts the situation with aplomb, but then again, Mike accepts everything with aplomb except when he's having post-traumatic breakdowns. He does say, "I should stop visiting Gram until I'm sure I'm not carrying anything, sir," with a quiet loneliness in his tone that makes Harvey muss Mike's hair, germs bedamned.

Mike blinks at him in surprise—Harvey hasn't gone near him in well over a week—but presses into the touch rather than ducking away. It takes Harvey longer than it should to realize he's still petting Mike like some kind of cat. He doesn't stop at the realization.

\*

Despite all of Harvey and Donna's precautions, Mike not only catches something, it's apparent from the start that it is some horrible amalgamation of everything that's been going around. He falls asleep at the office one evening, and the next morning, by the time he manages to turn off his alarm and stumble out of his bedroom, he's dizzy and weak enough that he collapses in the five steps it takes for him to get

to the bathroom. Harvey finds him there minutes later, when he comes to mention that there's coffee and tell Mike to hurry the hell up.

Harvey hasn't even gotten his hands on Mike when he starts to feel the heat coming off of him. Harvey swears under his breath and texts Donna an SOS. Then he gets Mike on his feet and pretty much drags him back to the room. Mike is mumbling things, but Harvey doesn't think they're intended for him. He isn't sure Mike is all that coherent.

Within the hour, Harvey's personal physician is at the door. Harvey sends Donna a Prada gift certificate while the doctor goes into examine Mike. Within seconds, Mike is screaming, pleading and Harvey doesn't even think before running into the room.

The doctor has backed away from the bed, where Mike has curled into himself and is babbling. Harvey wishes someone, anyone else were here: Vivian or Dr. Teng or Donna or Jessica or someone with an idea of how to handle the sobbing, frantic kid in front of him. But Harvey's also gotten used to the fact that wishes are fairly useless things. He tells the doctor, "Give us a minute."

Harvey has no idea if Mike has any clue who he is, or if Mike can even tell *where* he is. Harvey goes and sits on the bed, though and says calmly, "You're all right, kid. I—I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

Harvey is debating the wisdom of getting closer when one of Mike's eyes becomes visible. He's looking straight at Harvey. It takes a minute, but the sheer fright in that one eye dulls a little bit into confusion, and Mike asks, "Sir?"

"Hey there," Harvey says.

"Sir?" Mike asks again, just as he breaks into a cough that's wet and jagged and painful sounding. Harvey wonders if Mike has been sick for a while now, and Harvey somehow managed to miss the signs, if Mike was hiding them.

"C'mon," Harvey says, and tugs at Mike, trying to get him to unfurl. Mike comes slowly. It looks painful, as if everything aches. Harvey thinks it might.

"Sorry," Mike mutters. "Sorry, sorry, know I'm not supposed to."

"Supposed to what, Mike?"

"Get sick," Mike says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Then, again, "Sorry."

He's shivering, now, despite the heat pouring off of him. Harvey shifts until his back is against the headboard and pulls Mike to him. Mike makes a mewling, uncertain sound, and goes stiff in Harvey's arms. Harvey says, "Relax. It's all right. I've got you."

"Get you sick, sir." Mike shakes even harder, and the cough it forces from him racks his whole frame. Harvey just holds on, rubs his back.

"Let me worry about that."

When the worst of the coughing is over, Mike sort of folds into Harvey. Harvey suspects it's because he doesn't have the energy to do anything

else, but it feels like progress, all the same. Harvey says, "I'm gonna call the doctor back in. Try and stay calm, okay?"

"Sorry," Mike tells him. His fingers curl in Harvey's shirt. "Sorry."

Harvey sighs, and calls for the doctor.

\*

After a few minutes of prodding Mike, the doctor asks, "How long have you been feeling ill?"

Mike has a death-grip on Harvey's wrist—truly, there are going to be bruises that Harvey will hide with shirtsleeves and very firmly Not Think About—and he's breathing shallowly. Harvey isn't expecting a coherent answer. Mike's, "Not sure," is quiet and suspiciously coherent.

Harvey repeats, "How long, Mike?"

Mike falls back on, "Sorry, sorry, I didn't want—"

"How long?"

"Week, maybe, sir."

"Maybe?" Harvey prods. He knows Mike's ability to be precise with the passage of time all too well to be mollified by a guess. Absent unconsciousness, Mike can usually estimate time within seconds.

"Nine days," Mike admits. "Sir."

The person living in Harvey's guestroom and working in his office has been coming down with plague for over a week, and Harvey hasn't noticed. He'd worry he was losing his edge if didn't have one million other things to worry about first. "Next time, kid, say something."

"Not useful sick," Mike mumbles and then, as though noticing what he's said, begins to hyperventilate. This is shut down by the fact that Mike can't actually breathe at the moment, so he coughs up a few internal organs instead. Harvey slips a hand under Mike's—soaking—t-shirt and rubs at his back until the worst of the bout has passed. He thinks later he'll feel awkward about this, but just now all he wants is for Mike to calm the fuck down, to *trust* Harvey, even if just a bit. Sure, Harvey won him at a poker game just half a year ago, but he hasn't harmed Mike since, so he thinks he deserves a little bit of faith. He knows this assessment isn't fair. He doesn't care.

When Mike is breathing again, albeit loudly and brokenly, Harvey says, "I'm going to give you three answers to that. You go with whatever makes you feel the calmest. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Harvey nods. "One: it's okay not to be useful every now and then. Two: ignoring your health like this only makes you sicker longer, so it's a strategic move to get it out of the way immediately and quickly. Three: whatever he did when you were sick or somehow not useful to him, whatever that was, I'm not going to let it happen. You're going to stay here, in bed, getting better. That's it. With me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Harvey says. "Good."

He looks at the doctor, who doesn't appear thrilled, but he goes back to his examination. Mike holds onto Harvey, and answers the doctor's questions. Harvey stays still.

\*

Harvey has the doctor call Mike's prescriptions into the pharmacy before leaving. There's a veritable plethora of them, and if they don't start working within thirty-two hours, Harvey's going to have to take Mike to the hospital. Harvey can only imagine the type of fun that will be.

He calls Vivian and explains that Mike managed to catch pretty much every crossbreed of virus available at the Pearson Hardman Illness Boutique and conjure up a few of his own. Vivian tells Harvey, "I'm sure you'll take good care of him."

Harvey knows what a threat sounds like. Normally, he doesn't respond to them. In this case, he says, "He'll be fine," and realizes that he's telling himself more than her.

He calls Ray about picking up the pills. It's not Ray's job, Harvey knows, but he plans to give Ray a raise anyway, just for being a bastion of sanity. He figures he might as well make it look like it's for extra services. Also, Harvey's not leaving Mike alone, and he needs Donna at the office.

Ray shows up within the hour carrying a bag from the pharmacy and a Tupperware, which he sticks in Harvey's fridge. "It's my sister's ha-saa al-gereesh. It always makes me feel better."

Harvey thanks Ray and tells him he's probably got the next few days off. Ray says, "I'll keep my phone on me. Tell the kid to feel better."

Instead, Harvey heats the kid up some homemade soup—it smells really good, Harvey's going to have to steal some of it—and wakes him up to make him take some pills. Mike looks at the pills in his hand and Harvey eventually takes pity on him and tells him the names of what he's about to take. Mike swallows them dutifully, and finishes his soup slowly, progress retarded by the more-than-occasional cough and his probable desire not to choke.

When he's finished, Harvey takes the bowl and sticks it in the sink. He goes back into Mike's room carrying his tablet and a file and settles himself in the reading chair by the window. He looks up to find Mike struggling to keep his eyes open. Harvey says, "Give into it, kid."

"Sedative," Mike slurs.

"I know," Harvey tells him.

The look Mike gives him is so filled with betrayal Harvey almost looks away. He doesn't. "I'm here. I'll wake you up if it gets bad. You need the sleep."

Mike still looks like he would rather be walking barefoot over fire pits, or being fed alive to ravenous dogs than close his eyes just then, but

when he says, "Yes, sir," it's not a blank response. There's a little edge of belief Harvey can barely identify, but he knows for certain that's what it is. Mike shuts his eyes. It's a while before Harvey can make himself look down and focus on his work.

\*

Harvey has to wake Mike four times in as many hours. Each time results in Mike jolting awake, disoriented and terrified. On that fourth time, Mike's so soaked in sweat he's shivering from it, and Harvey goes to get him a fresh shirt. Mike gets confused in the middle of Harvey helping him to change, the fever clearly stripping anything relevant from his mind, and takes the undressing as a cue to take care of Harvey.

He's got Harvey's jeans undone before Harvey can even say, "No," and Harvey has to physically pin Mike to the bed to get him to stop. At which point, Mike loses it.

Up until this moment, Harvey would have told anyone whose business it was to know that he'd seen the worst of the results of Mike's damage. What's happening in front of him makes it clear how completely fucking asinine that assumption was. Mike is offering services Harvey has never even *heard* of before, and Harvey is not a blushing rose. The worst part is the eagerness in the kid's voice as he offers to let Harvey *urinate in his mouth*, for fuck's sake—just for starters, really—and the way Harvey knows it's not real, knows it's a survival tactic.

Harvey thinks, *get his fever down, get his fever down and this will stop*. One of the prescriptions was supposed to do just that, he's sure, but it's clearly not working. He's going to have to do this the old-fashioned way.

He carries Mike to his bathroom, with the tub large enough for three, and puts him in there, turning the water on cold. Mike breathes thinly and coughs wrenchingly and in between, offers frantic thoughts to distract Harvey from who-only-knows what.

Harvey carefully does not think about the electrical burns on the back of Mike's knees and his palms. Instead he gently dunks Mike, trying to get the whole of him cooled off. Instead of continuing with his frantic offerings, struggling to come back up, Mike goes limp under the water.

Later, Harvey will probably deny this, but he's pretty sure his heart stops for several crucial seconds. Then he's pulling Mike up and Mike is coughing harshly, Harvey rubbing his back and saying, "Okay, just get it out."

When the worst of the cough dies down, Mike blinks at Harvey, then blinks again. Then he says, "Oh. I-- Delirious?"

The correct answer to that is yes. Instead, Harvey says, somewhat abrasively —but, under the circumstances, he feels he can be forgiven —"You went *still* under the water."

Mike is shivering now, and his skin is still too damned hot for someone who's sitting in cold tap water, but Harvey needs to feel him breathing. He drags Mike out of the tub and wraps him in a towel, drying him off, rubbing Mike's back through each coughing jag. Mike is so tired he can't keep his eyes open when he mumbles, "Better not to fight."

"Not to—" Harvey pauses. "He liked to play asphyxiation games."

"Lots of things you can do with water," Mike tells Harvey tiredly. "Lots of places it can go. Lots of temperatures it can be. Lots of stuff it interacts with. But there's simple things, too, like drowning someone in a sink. Power game, really. Better if you give in. Over quicker."

Harvey's not sure exactly when Mike ended up on his lap, if that's where Harvey put him, or if he somehow made his way there, but it doesn't matter, because it's the right place for him, where Harvey can run his fingers over the ridged, marked skin of Mike's back, hold the towel around him and squeeze through the worst of the shivers. Harvey has never wanted another human being this near to him, has never wanted this kind of responsibility.

When Mike finally allows himself to rest his head in the crook between Harvey's shoulder and neck, his lips moving against Harvey's skin in a soft, "Thank you, thanks," Harvey knows, in the way he has known very few things, that he wants this. He also knows that means letting Mike go as soon as he's able, means letting Mike *be*.

Harvey pulls Mike in tighter, and allows himself pretend he has all the time in the world before that happens.

\*

Mike falls asleep with Harvey holding him. Harvey rouses him enough just to get him in boxers, and then he climbs in bed with Mike, spoons him and waits for the next nightmare to hit. He falls asleep waiting, and when he wakes, it's been nearly three hours.

Harvey frowns at the clock, as though it might be lying, and cave under his interrogation techniques. It does not. He extracts himself from Mike—no easy feat, the kid seemingly has tentacles, or something of the sort—and goes to get his meds. Mike wakes fuzzily, but calmly when Harvey rubs circles in his stomach. Harvey sits him up and makes him swallow the meds and then spoons a cup of soup into him. Mike tells him, "Yummy," and falls asleep sitting up.

Harvey manages about an hour of work before Mike starts getting restless again, and Harvey finds himself cuddling back up to Mike. After all, it worked before. He's a little surprised, even so, to discover that it works again. He'd sort of figured it was sheer exhaustion the first time. Then again, it could still be that, maybe.

Eventually, he moves his work into the bed, so that Mike can sleep with his head on Harvey's leg and Harvey can actually get things accomplished. Harvey loses feeling in his leg at least twice an hour and has to shift things. Mike sleeps like the dead, straight through, as long as he doesn't lose contact with Harvey.

Jessica shows up at a little past seven. She finds them—Harvey can hear the click of her shoes checking his room before the one Mike has been staying in—and doesn't say a word other than, "Still keep the tv trays in the pantry?"

At Harvey's nod, she slips out and then comes back, setting a tray next to Harvey on the bed and using it to host two of his wine glasses, shortly filled with a Malbec, and take-away cartons of handmade

pappardelle smothered in Bolognese. Just the smell brings back winter nights before Harvard, when Harvey was just barely making his way through NYU, the night janitorial job at Pearson Hardman enough to make ends meet, but nothing else. That was when Jessica had first taken to letting him in on the secrets of all her favorite Italian dives in the city, half of them impossible to find if you didn't already know where you were going, like some forsaken treasure island.

She hands him a fork and he says, "Thank you," and doesn't mean for the wine or the pasta or the flatware.

She says, "You're welcome," lightly, but with the acceptance of what she's being thanked for. She lets Harvey eat in silence, pouring him another glass when he finishes. He raises an eyebrow at her, but she just smiles. He drinks the second glass.

Mike fights his way up to consciousness as Harvey's closing up the take-away carton. His gaze finds Jessica and he goes very still against Harvey. Harvey musses his hair. Jessica takes the tray into the kitchen while Harvey gets Mike to take more meds.

She returns with a cup of steaming fagioli, which Mike manages to finish, if slowly. He presses close to Harvey and says softly, "Thank you, ma'am. Sorry, I-- Do you need—" Mike's coughing cuts him off, and by the time he finishes, he's nearly asleep again.

Harvey pushes him back down and soothes the covers over him and very studiously does not look at Jessica. Jessica, though, has come over to Mike's side of the bed and is ruffling his hair. She tells him softly, "I think you need him more, kid."

*For now*, Harvey thinks. Jessica passes him on her way out of the room, squeezing his shoulder and saying, "You get some sleep as well. The last thing I need is you catching this."

Then she's gone, nothing but the scent of comfort food left in her wake, and Harvey is free to slide down and wrap himself around Mike, if only until the kid starts feeling a little better. It's all for Mike, really. Harvey's last conscious thought is that he's so much more tired than he ever remembers being.

\*

It takes about thirty-six hours of soup, orange juice, tea, medicine and sleep, but Mike's fever breaks and he manages to take a shower and change by himself. Then he climbs back into bed. Harvey has quickly changed the sheets while Mike was fighting the good fight in the bathroom. Mike then sleeps for another ten hours.

Harvey stays with him, because every time he tries to get work done in another room, he thinks he hears something and has to go check. Sometimes Mike actually is tossing and frantic, sometimes not, but in the end, it's just easier to stay.

Harvey wakes up on Sunday, and he can feel how early it is, even if he isn't looking at the clock. Mike is awake and looking at him, expression guarded and unsure. When Harvey catches him, Mike's gaze flinches away, but it comes back. Harvey smiles, his whole face taking a while to respond. It really is very early. He asks, "Alive?"



Mike smiles back, just a little, just enough. "Mostly. Sorry."

Harvey rolls onto his back. "You apologize too much."

"Sor-- Um."

Harvey's eyes drift shut and he smirks. He makes himself ask the next question before he can think about it too much, before he can consider the consequences. "What does it mean, to not be useful?"

Mike makes a noise in the back of his throat. "Sir—"

"Harvey." Harvey opens his eyes. "My name is Harvey."

"H-harvey," Mike mimics.

"We'll work on it," Harvey assures him, and processes how his name sounds in Mike's mouth. Despite the stutter, it's stronger, more grounded than Harvey thought it would be. Harvey enjoys it as much as he suspected he would. He gives himself and the kid a second, then goes back to pressing where it hurts. "What happens then, Mike?"

Despite it frustrating his own goals, Harvey feels something warm and pleasant roll its way up his back when Mike asks, "Do I have to talk about this?"

"No," Harvey tells him. "No. But I wish you would."

Mike shifts and then gets up from the bed, pacing for a few minutes. Harvey follows him lazily with his eyes, but doesn't interrupt. It's Mike's decision. Finally, Mike stills and says, "To pay off, an investment must have its uses."

Mike wraps his arms over himself and quiets. Harvey prompts him with a soft, "Axiomatic, but all right."

Mike presses his lips together. "There *are* recourses for an Indebted whose contract holder defaults on the contract."

Harvey has a sick suspicion he knows where this is going. "Technically, sure, but—"

"They're almost impossible to enforce. Indebteds don't have the resources." Mike starts moving again. "Two months, maybe? After Van Pimp bought me? That was my first party. Before that, he'd kept me mostly to himself, sometimes friends or people who had the money. But I hadn't entertained before."

Harvey is never going to be able to manage a dinner party in good conscience again. He swallows and keeps listening.

"It can get out of hand, with that many people."

"How many?" Harvey asks, not because he wants to know, but because Mike *will* know, and Harvey thinks someone other than Mike should have to carry that knowledge.

"Seventeen. He, he fed me Viagra before it. A lot. So I'd—"

"Yeah," Harvey says.

"There was alcohol, and toys were around, and what's the use of a living toy if you don't get to show it off, so I—I'd gotten pretty good at taking a whipping. He usually, I mean, it *hurt*, but he'd usually stop before he broke skin."

Harvey knows it wasn't all the time. Mike's skin tells that story all too plainly.

"I fell when he changed to the Cat. I hadn't— he'd never used that before, it hit deeper and I wasn't ready."

Harvey bites his tongue to keep himself from interrupting. He asked for this.

"So he let them punish me. I kind of thought for sure they'd kill me, because it just went on and on and sometimes it was two at a time and other stuff, but mostly just one after another and I didn't think the human body could take that, but I woke up, again, after."

"Good," Harvey says, because he can't not, because he's not sure Mike feels the same way.

"And he explained, very patiently to me, that it was only useless slaves who could not perform to their master's standards. And that useless slaves would be punished. I thought, I was sure he had meant what he'd let them do, but that was," Mike shakes his head. "That was just part of being owned."

"Mike?"

"He skipped one of Gram's bills. They—it only takes two, and they'll put you out, even if you've got nowhere to go. And there was no way I could've fought it, not in time, not—"

"Okay," Harvey says. "Okay."

Mike looks at him, then, eyes *too* blue. "I know you're not the same. I *know* that." He points to his head. "But I don't." His palm presses against his chest. "Not here. I don't even know how to imagine it."

"Not yet," Harvey tells him.

"I don't—"

"You learned to stand still while someone took a whip to you, over and over, as many times as he pleased." The words cut at Harvey's throat. "You can relearn this. Easy."

Mike's laugh is delayed, and wet, but it is a laugh. "Easy."

Harvey pulls out his most cock-sure smile. "Easy."

\*

Mike makes up for the time he missed at work within a day, and manages to find a drafting error that would have left a client open to significant liability in one of the contracts Harvey gave to his associate in a—clearly misplaced—show of good faith.

At around eight, when Harvey is still crafting the brief that's been a

thorn in his side for two days—largely because their case is weak and Harvey still hasn't found the magic that's going to force the other side into settlement—Jessica knocks on his door and then steps inside, a woman Harvey's never seen following right behind her.

Mike looks up from what he's working on and glances at Harvey. Harvey tells Jessica, "Good evening."

Jessica smiles. "Harvey, Mike, this is Nieve Olvera. She's the head of an organization called—"

Jessica cuts off at the sound of Mike dropping what is probably a fifteen pound annotated code book on his foot. He doesn't even seem to notice.

Harvey asks, "Mike?"

"Sorry, Harvey, Ma'am," Mike says, and the "Harvey" might as well be a "sir."

Ms. Olvera smiles, warm and genuine and still somehow sharp. She's probably in her fifties, but she's weathered the years well. She barely comes to Jessica's shoulder, and her form is more athletic than shapely, but her pantsuit is classic and well-tailored, and she presents an attractive picture. She says, "You know about me. About FAIR."

Harvey doesn't hear the acronym at first, just the word. Then something he read back when he was setting Mike up with the job comes to him. FAIR: Forgiveness, Amortization or Interest Restructuring, an organization dedicated to using the currently legal methods available for Indebted manumission, as well as lobbying for the abolition of Indebted Servitude in total.

Mike looks terrified, as though he's been caught stealing Harvey's favorite sports memorabilia and using it to play with a puppy, or something equally heinous. Harvey says, "He knows lots of things. Kid's a knowledge sponge."

When it's clear Mike isn't going to find words at any time in the near future, Harvey offers, "Have a seat, Ms. Olvera, Jessica."

"I prefer Nieve." She turns one of the chairs so that it's facing the couch. Harvey goes and sits next to Mike, not so close as to be touching, but close enough that Mike can touch Harvey, if he chooses to.

Jessica sits in a chair as well. There's a moment of tense, almost claustrophobic silence and then Harvey says, "Tell me how we do this, without him having to worry once he's secured his freedom."

Nieve gives them their options, numbers-wise. Indebteds can be forgiven up to a certain amount for recognition of services rendered. It's a pitiful amount given what can be done to one—what *has* been done to Mike—but reflective of the lack of recognition of personhood, so unsurprising. Total forgiveness is forbidden on a legislative theory of fiscal responsibility that would make Harvey laugh if it didn't make him want to kill something.

The problem being that Indebteds are legally unable to receive pay or benefits as part of their station; hence why Harvey has been keeping Mike's salary in a shell account. Harvey mentions this when Mike softly

points out this issue. Mike stares at him.

Harvey says, "You earn it."

"Technically, I don't. I earn Gram's bills."

"Technically, I'm your boss, so I get to decide your salary."

Nieve is amused, Harvey can tell. He suspects he's passed some kind of test he didn't know—but probably should have realized—he was taking. He's about to ask her about how they can restructure the "loan," when Mike stands. He looks like he might fall over, but he stays upright and says, "C-can we talk? Alone?"

Harvey glances at Jessica. "You know where the bar is."

Then he walks out to the hallway, Mike at first a step behind, but catching up.

\*

Mike walks to Donna's desk and sits down in her chair, curling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. It's annoyingly adorable and slightly terrifying all at once, because it's a blatant show of vulnerability Mike has allowed himself, clearly consciously.

Harvey waits him out, mostly because all the other ideas he comes up with taste sour on his tongue before he can even voice them. Eventually, Mike cracks. "Are you going to make me do this?"

Harvey isn't as surprised as he wants to be. He has suspected Mike still has reservations. "Define 'make me.'"

"Order me to. Take the money out of whatever account you're putting it in and sign my name to the papers. Do whatever it takes. It's not as though I can protest. There's absolutely no legal recourse for an Indebted who wishes to maintain property-status."

Harvey doesn't answer immediately, because he doesn't know, and Mike doesn't deserve glibness, not when he's challenging Harvey, telling Harvey what he wants. It's because of that Harvey knows the only true answer he can give is, "No. I won't. But I wish you would do this."

Mike tilts his head. "Why?"

Harvey shakes his head. "Why don't you want it? I told you it won't be like before, and it's not as if I've lied to you until now."

Mike picks at imaginary lint on one knee. "When I first signed the contract, I told myself that I was smart enough to have any owner doing exactly what I wanted within a week of buying me. And I believed it. I figured I would convince that person to set up a type of FAIR-related remittance program as soon as I came up with another idea for taking care of Gram, and everything'd be fine."

It's probably what Harvey would have told himself. "Okay."

"By the time you first saw me, the only thing I ever told myself was that I would find a way to survive, because even if the fruits of the contract were devisable, I didn't want to take the chance that he

wouldn't breach."

"And you did," Harvey points out.

"Some of me," Mike says. "Maybe even most, although, I wasn't sure until you started finding the missing parts. But not-- Not the part that wants what I wanted before. That kid died, whimpering and crying and pathetic and I have no desire to revive him."

Harvey swallows. He doesn't think that's true, not entirely, and not in the way Mike is suggesting, but that's a fight for another night. "And what do you want now?"

Mike thinks. Harvey has learned to tell when Mike is being careful, as he is now. Mike almost whispers, "Safety. I'm safe with you, Gram is safe while I'm with you. That's what I want. And if you do this, you're asking me to give it up."

"You trust me to keep you safe," Harvey says, more a statement than anything, although it's something he'll come back to and process later. "Right?"

Slowly, Mike nods.

"Then can you trust me when I tell you that this is part of a plan to keep you as safe as I know how?"

Mike tightens up on himself, but he doesn't answer immediately. His answer, when it comes, is soft and cracks a bit at the end. "I'm trusting you."

Harvey would usually accept this as his due, but right now he's more hopeful and less sure that he can come through than he wishes. "Let's go talk logistics."

Harvey doesn't think too much about the instinctive squeeze his hand forms when Mike slips his hand into Harvey's, letting Harvey pull him back to the office.

\*

It takes a little less than a month to get all the details sorted. At the end, though, Nieve, Harvey and Mike have hammered out the legalities and timeline of the process.

Mike can have his freedom in the space of a year. It will take longer for the debt to be fully discharged, but manumission does not require that.

In essence, Harvey has a year to remind Mike that his own two feet can hold him up just fine. Harvey has a year to remind himself that he prefers living alone.

\*

Harvey's associate gets seduced away by a smaller firm willing to offer him partnership at a decidedly earlier date. Harvey can't really blame the guy, but it's annoying, since firm policy means he's in the market again, and Harvey *hates* being in that market. He considers floating the idea to Jessica that now that he's got Mike he doesn't need an

associate, but a) he doesn't really enjoy the look Jessica gets on her face when she's silently laughing at him, and b) Mike can't exactly be expected to go out and talk to people on his own, and Harvey likes to use his associates—when he likes using them at all—for more than just paperwork.

Donna sets up the interviews and the morning of gives him a wink, so he knows they've still got a system; not that he really expected anything less from her. Mike sits unobtrusively in a corner chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up just enough that the ID bracelet shows. He'd asked, "Do you need me there?" which was serious progress, so it hadn't thrilled Harvey to have to say, "I do," but people's reaction to Mike would be an important factor in his hiring decision.

The first two candidates Donna just rolls her eyes about and they don't even acknowledge Mike's presence. Harvey's able to close out the interviews within fifteen minutes apiece. The third one Harvey doesn't let in the door, after the look he casts at Mike. The fourth one seems to be attempting some semblance of humanity, and it's not that Harvey requires his associate to have a soul, but if the person is going to pretend, he'd best do it well.

The fifth interviewee has Donna giving Harvey an unsure face, which, to date, Harvey can only remember happening a handful of times and never in the department of gauging people. Qian Jun walks into the room, holds out his hand, spots Mike and retracts it. "I'm sorry for wasting your time, Mr. Specter."

He turns to leave. Harvey says, "Give me a second of yours, Mr. Jun."

Jun hesitates. After a second he says, "It's Mr. Qian. And I will not work with an Owner. I wish you the best of luck in your search."

Harvey glances at Mike who has actually looked up from his work and is paying attention for the first time all day. Or, rather, Harvey doesn't doubt Mike has paid plenty of attention, just none of it this obvious. Harvey is about to try and find the right words to explain the situation when Mike says, "You should hear him out, Mr. Qian."

Jun turns back slowly, until he's looking at Mike. After a moment he says, "That's one hell of a test."

"Necessary," Harvey says. It's not an apology.

Jun's nod is thoughtful. "I can imagine."

"I wasn't aware there were any idealists left at Harvard."

Jun's responding expression is sharp. "Not interviewing for this job, in any case. I'm not any more of an idealist than you are, Mr. Specter. I just believe capitalism should have its limits."

It's a good response, very good. "Will you take a seat?"

Jun inclines his head and sits down. Harvey looks over at Mike, who quirks his lips, small and almost unrecognizable as a smile. Harvey knows what it means. He grills Jun on recent precedent on RICO legislation anyway. It'll be something to tell Jessica when she asks.

\*

The interviews take place on a Thursday, which, barring work-related emergencies, is always a basketball night for Harvey and Mike. Without acknowledging that he's actually looking, Harvey notices Mike is finally starting to regain some muscle. He's been at an appropriate weight for his height for a couple of months, but it's taken a while for his body to decide it can start converting some of the weight again.

They both push harder than they should, Harvey because he can't get the look on Candidate #3's face out of his mind, Mike probably because he had to sit like a puppy in the window all morning. In any case, they both need it. Mike even gets slightly pushy at one point, and Harvey revels in the aggressiveness, pushing back just enough to make Mike feel respected, not threatened.

They stop when Mike wobbles and then sinks to the court floor, sitting for a moment before lying on his back like a beached starfish. Harvey joins him on the floor, but stays upright. There's a comfortable silence between them, allowing Harvey to drift into billing considerations and other minutiae which bores him but has to be dealt with on occasion.

Mike cuts into this thought process by saying, "Harvey."

It's the first time Mike has ever said his name unprompted. Harvey says, "Mike."

"Jun's right, you're not an idealist."

"And you're not generally one to state the obvious, and yet, here we are."

"You were at Van Pimp's that night to sign a client."

Harvey doesn't like where this is going. "And I did."

"But you might not have. You—you had a plan, and I didn't fit into it."

Understatement of the *century*. "Maybe I have long term personal plans that you do fit into."

Mike considers this, unblinking. "You're usually a better liar than that."

Harvey is, it's true. *You throw me off my game*. "As it turns out, I still have principles about outright cruelty. I assure you, nobody is more surprised than I."

"I've thanked you for Gram and the books and other stuff, but never for that, for taking that risk."

Harvey laughs sharply. "I *really* didn't do it for your gratitude, kid."

"I know," Mike sits up. "I know that. But I think you're the one person in the world, myself included, who might think it's worth something. So I figured it was worth mentioning."

Harvey takes a deep breath as a way of processing the dull ache that Mike's admission--*myself included*--causes in his chest. Then he stands and offers Mike a hand. "C'mon. It's a burgers and milkshakes night."

Mike takes the hand and lets Harvey pull him up, he even smiles as he does it. Harvey tells himself it's because Mike is smart, and Mike

understands that this is Harvey's way of accepting what he's just been given. Harvey reminds himself that he is rarely wrong, not when it counts.

\*

Mike leaves Harvey's office to go to the bathroom one day and comes back with Jun as an escort. Harvey looks up, thinking Jun might be finished with the 12(b)(6) Harvey wanted drafted, but the expression on Jun's face tells him this visit has nothing to do with legal paperwork, and Mike is pretending—badly—not to slink back to his spot on the couch.

Harvey wants to hear it from Mike first, if he can, so he keeps his gaze on Mike. Mike steadfastly refuses to look at him. Harvey says, "Mike."

Mike doesn't look up. "According to the associates, Ms. Pearson's look-don't-touch policy had several ambiguities."

It's been nearly five months since the Associate Incident and Jessica laying down the law on that. It's been two weeks since Jun started. Harvey doesn't think this is a one-off for the associates, it's much more likely that Mike has just never mentioned anything, and Harvey, fuck, hasn't noticed. Evidently, the associates have decided Jun is one of their own, at least enough to misbehave in front of him. Jun has a stillness to him that makes Harvey think he wants to put his hand through a wall. It's an interesting, cold type of anger that Harvey can appreciate. "Jun?"

Jun shrugs, clearly willing to allow Mike his own version of events. "There was no touching."

But lawyers live and die off their ability to talk, to create truths with their words. Harvey is only so reassured. Harvey switches his attention to Mike. "I distinctly remember giving you a response to that kind of behavior."

"Shockingly, punching someone doesn't win any contests for wittiness," Mike informs him dryly. "And seems likely to escalate a no-win situation for me."

Jun snickers. After a second of just being pleased at Mike's snark, his daring, Harvey does too. Mike blinks then, and looks uncertain for a moment. Harvey talks before Mike can let it grow into full-on panic or an apology. "So come up with something that does, genius."

"Harvey—"

"They're nobody, Mike; hopped up little rich boys who've never been told no and have had someone wipe their asses for them their whole life. Show them what an actual, honest-to-G-d *person* can do, can be."

Mike stares at Harvey, his eyes a little wide. Harvey has forgotten Jun is there, so it's a little bit of a surprise when he asks, "If Mike should have to punch someone, do I have permission to, uh, back him up?"

"Don't kill anyone, and don't tell Jessica I granted it."

Jun nods. "Done."



"She'll know," Donna says. Harvey looks around Jun to rolls his eyes at her through the glass. She contents herself with looking smug and superior.

He says, "I'm assuming your silence will be bought by permission to go so far as killing someone?"

She generously counters, "I'd settle for permanent maiming and/or sterilization."

Harvey says dryly, "You drive a hard bargain."

She smiles angelically. "My silence is worth it."

Mike surprises everyone by speaking up. "This is all predicated upon me actually punching a non-Indebted, you realize?"

Harvey catches Donna's eye. She winks. Jun tilts his head, clearly waiting for Harvey's rejoinder. Harvey tells Mike: "We're counting on you, kid."

\*

Of course, Mike doesn't punch anyone. Instead, he goes on a systematic spree of figuring out the weakness of each and every associate who has bothered him and uses them as verbal ammunition, generally well-timed to catch Louis' attention, thereby delivering a double dose of payback, since Louis feels no quandaries about continuing to use Mike's observations and the fruits off his slowly-growing, hard-won confidence. After the first time—which Donna reports back to him—Harvey works out a code with Jun so that he knows to be just coming around the corner, or whatever, when Mike's in Seek and Destroy mode.

It takes about a month—spoiled dicks who've been through the gauntlet of moot court are nothing if not tenacious in their belief that being enough of an asshole will beat down even the most staunch resistance—but Mike wins his own right to walk through the firm halls unbothered. Harvey's almost disappointed when the opposition backs down: watching Mike play hard ball has become a highlight of his days.

A few weeks after Mike's unannounced, but clearly recognized victory, Jun pokes his head in Harvey's office at around ten in the evening and says, "I'm meeting up with some college classmates who work in town for drinks, you interested, Mike?"

Mike, who didn't even look up at Jun's entrance, clearly having expected him to be there for Harvey, snaps to attention and says, "Uh."

Jun glances at Harvey. "You're invited too, but I figure you probably have a life that doesn't involve your work charge."

Harvey used to. For a while he was even pretty convinced that he missed the ease of women who didn't want anything more from him than he wanted from them, and the evenings that were just himself and the expanse of the city beyond his windows. He's long since stopped lying to himself. However, if Mike will go out with Jun alone, Harvey knows he should let him, allow Mike to spend some time with other abolitionists, people his own age.

And Harvey knows, without having to ask, that's Jun's plan as well. It's weird to find himself trusting someone who is not Donna or Jessica with Mike, but Jun gets Mike to open up in a way few people have managed. Harvey's not willing to say no to anything that helps Mike, even if he hates the feeling he gets when Jun manages to force a laugh from Mike, or when the two of them have conversations to which Harvey's not privy.

Harvey says, "You should go. Ray'll pick you up when you're ready to leave."

"You don't have plans tonight," Mike says.

"I could," Harvey tells him.

Harvey watches as Mike thinks louder than the LP playing in the background. Finally Mike tells Jun, "Thanks, but I—"

Harvey rolls his eyes. "Text me the name of the bar. We'll be right behind you."

"Great," Jun smiles. Jun has a lot of smiles, and Harvey hasn't learned to read them all yet, but this one is sincere. Harvey appreciates it, because under the guise of giving him an out, Harvey doesn't doubt Jun would probably *like* to spend the evening without his boss.

Jun leaves then and Mike watches him go. After he's around the corner, Mike says, "If you wanted to do something else, or, I mean, just not have me around—"

"Wrong assumption," Harvey tells him. "Try again."

"Occam's razor and casual behavioral observations suggest you want me to go and you think I won't without you."

"Am I wrong?"

"No," Mike admits, sounding tired and frustrated and, worst of all, resigned.

Harvey's more of a tough-love than inspirational speech guy, but he's learning for Mike. "One step, Mike. Let's just go and have a couple of drinks. Maybe next time you do it on your own, or maybe the time after that."

After a moment, Mike nods tightly. "Okay. Okay."

Harvey calls Ray for a pick up, and hopes that he'll get there before Mike can lose his nerve.

\*

Jun's friends are an eclectic group: an adjunct professor at Teacher's College with a specialization in the economics of education; a Skadden fellow in the process of putting together a ♦ 1983 class action suit against the largest housing outfit in Queens; a finance consultant for Citizen's; and a talent agent working for an independent outfit. None of them quite fit together, which means that Mike and he aren't exactly outsiders. It's easier than Harvey would have imagined it being to order a scotch, nudge Mike to order—a beer—and let the conversation flow

over him.

Mike is on edge, but not in a bad way, just in a way that means he's paying attention. It does not pass Harvey's notice that a few of the others will pause if they think Mike is going to say something. So far he hasn't, but Harvey thinks he's gotten close, and that's something.

They've been there about an hour when a woman who looks startlingly like Jun comes in wearing scrubs, pushes the finance expert over so that she can have a seat and says, "Sorry I'm late, surgery ran long."

Jun hands her the lager he's about a third of the way through, and she flashes him a smile before taking a sip. Jun says, "Harvey, Mike, this is Hui-Ying, my big sister, and the brains of the family."

He says it with a calm self-awareness Harvey senses will end up being his biggest strength as a lawyer. Harvey holds out his hand. "Pleasure, Dr. Qian."

"Hui, please." She shakes. "Harvey Specter, in the flesh."

Harvey quirks an eyebrow at Jun, who might blush. It's hard to tell in the dark of the bar. Hui pulls her hand away and moves it in Mike's direction. Mike looks at it for a second, shooting a sidelong glance at Harvey, who isn't going to tell him what to do, one way or the other. Mike swallows and grips her hand. "Mike. Uh. You got the brains and the looks? Sucks to be Jun."

Hui's grin is quick and alive. "His life is tragic, it's true."

It's the first time Mike has actually said anything since they showed up, and Harvey can tell the others are trying their best—and mostly failing—not to stare. Mike moves in closer to Harvey, probably instinctively. He's still looking at Hui, though, an expression on his face Harvey has definitely never seen. Harvey tells himself that's why it takes him a few minutes to recognize it for what it obviously is: Mike is looking at Hui like a boy looks at a girl.

The fierce desire to take Mike and go home, where it's just the two of them, isn't a surprise to Harvey, but it's annoying. Mike isn't his, not in the ways that matter. Also, on an intellectual level, Harvey can see how, even if Mike is into guys—something Harvey is not positive about—a woman would be a hell of a lot less threatening at this point. Well, a woman who is not Donna or Jessica. Harvey really can't fault Mike for not even wanting to open his eyes when either of them is in the room. They're scary as shit for someone *without* serious PTSD.

The conversation picks up again, mostly because Jun needles Hui about something she did earlier in the week—evidently they live together—and the others have enough familiarity to join in. Harvey appreciates Jun's insights and efforts, even if he will never say as much to his associate.

After his second beer, Mike is actually leaning slightly against Harvey. He's a little too still for Harvey's comfort, like he's holding himself together against the other option of falling completely apart. Harvey makes their excuses and they go out front to wait for Ray.

Harvey smirks. "Looks and brains, huh?"

Mike rubs a hand over his face. "Since I wasn't a virgin before, I can

only assume that I, at some point, had more game than this."

"Game, really? Are you *sure* you weren't a—"

"I can quote the definition of 'virgin' for you. From four different English language dictionaries. With etymology."

"Not helping your case."

"No, but girls do like an off-the-cuff rendition of the Sonnets. Or sometimes Blake, with the ones who like to think they're kinky."

Harvey forebears to comment on that statement, thinking Mike was probably convinced of their kinkiness at one time, too. "Women like hapless in men who can pull it off."

"You're not helping," Mike tells him.

"Not really trying. Are you doing that thing where you mistake me for someone who cares, again?"

"That must be it," Mike says. His tone is unapologetic.

\*

Harvey's internal alarm clock is pretty consistent. Seven on weekdays, so that he can work out and shower before rolling in to the office, nine on weekends. As such, he's a bit befuddled to awaken on Saturday to his clock's cool blue assertion that it is only eight thirty-four. Additionally, his condo smells strange, like baked goods.

Harvey slides out of bed and pads into the kitchen to see if he's forgotten ordering breakfast earlier in the week, or something else that would explain the aroma. What he finds is Mike, scowling at him and saying, "It's not nine. I have twenty-five minutes."

Mike's tone suggests that Harvey waking early is the rough equivalent of having killed Mike's childhood pet and only friend. Harvey is distracted, though, because, "Are you cooking?"

There's a moment where Mike looks uncertain and Harvey prepares for him to come slightly apart, but he takes a deep breath and just says, "Yes." Then, "I inferred from the eating-any-time-I-want-whatever-I-want rule and the manumission efforts that it would probably be all right?"

Harvey comes further into the kitchen, peering over Mike's shoulder at the recipes he's got sitting on the counter, printed out from a food blog. "Have you been able to cook this whole time?"

Mike shrugs. "I'm not trained or anything. Should I have mentioned? Gram always said a boy needs to know how to take care of himself."

Mike flushes, so Harvey forebears commenting on the irony. Instead he asks, "Are you really making Dutch apple pancakes?"

"You like apple pie. I made some logical assumptions about preferences in breakfast food."

"Maple sausage?" Harvey asks hopefully.

"That one was made obvious by the fact that I've lived with you for nearly a year." Mike turns back to the bowl he'd been concentrating on when Harvey had so rudely woken up and come into his own kitchen.

Harvey take a seat in one of the bar chairs and asks, "Why now?"

"'Cause now I can ask Jun to ask Donna things and Donna can do them without me having to face her or inform you."

Harvey can't help the slight smirk that steals over his face, he really can't. "Still afraid of her?"

"Just that she's going to rip my spine out."

"Just that, huh?" Harvey keeps his tone light, but the question is sincere.

Mike either knows that, or is just ready to actually talk about it. "I mean that it's normal fear, because she's intense, not PTSD fear. At least, not mostly. Some, or I probably wouldn't need to have an intermediary, but I talked with Dr. Teng and she agreed that it's possible I'm just going to be more timid as a general rule than I was Before."

Harvey considers saying something about experience leaving its mark or maybe just poking lightly at Mike's "timidness" which is disappearing more and more around Harvey. In the end he just asks, "Orange juice?"

Mike nods. "I grabbed a bottle of bubbly, in case you wanted a mimosa."

Harvey grins. "Am I celebrating something?"

"Your first homecooked meal since you left home?" Mike offers.

Harvey doesn't tell him it's been longer than that. He swipes the bottle and gets to working off the top.

\*

They fall into what Harvey thinks of as their second pattern. The first will always be filled with Mike sleeping on Harvey's couch, waking to eat and then curling back up again. The second is based on days and evenings at the office, once-a-week outings with Jun and his friends when possible, Thursday basketball, and at least one home-cooked feast over the weekend.

About three weeks after the Dutch Apple Breakfast Surprise, Harvey catches Jun making Mike go talk to Donna himself. Harvey thinks about interfering, because Mike has the right not to do things he doesn't want to, and because the thought of Mike scared of anything, even if there's no good reason for him to be, makes Harvey's back tighten up, his muscles twist in wince-inducing ways. In the end, though, he stays clear, not only so that Jun and Mike can keep up the charade of Harvey not noticing, but because Donna is Donna, and Harvey trusts her to figure out how to make Mike settle.

A little over two months into the schedule, Harvey catches the tail end

of a case that comes to him off of a retired senior partner and the whole thing is a damn mess. Even with the help of Jun and Mike, they're all three working 24/7, to the point where Donna is forced to send them all home to shower and change on one particularly memorable morning.

By the time Harvey has overhauled the situation and gotten the clusterfuck of a case out of the courtroom and back in the negotiation room, then tightly controlled the negotiation into a positive outcome for his client, he literally doesn't even know what day it is, or how long it has been since he started working on the problem. Luckily, Donna keeps track of his billables. Also luckily, Jessica has shown an appropriate amount of appreciation for the fact that Harvey is fixing the fuck-ups of a partner who should have been made to retire years before now and has diverted the daily client-oriented issues Harvey would have been dealing with otherwise directly to her office.

After the papers on the settlement have been signed and filed, Harvey tells Jun, "Go home. Take the afternoon."

He calls Ray, and Mike and him go back to the condo. Harvey turns on ESPN and falls asleep on his couch. Mike may or may not do the same. Harvey isn't awake long enough to be sure.

Harvey wakes up to the low buzz of ESPN still running. It's dark in the condo, which means he's slept at least half a day. He sits up, turns the TV off and the lights in the room on. He walks to the kitchen, considering take-away and more sleep. On the counter, there's a note. It reads, "Jun called. At Sangria. You slept through his call, I thought it would be kind of a dick move to wake you. Be back before midnight. Have my phone, call if you want me to come back. Or just come on down, if you're feeling like company."

Harvey reads the message twice. Sangria's is a tapas and wine place a couple of blocks over, easily walkable. Still, Harvey should tell Mike he can call Ray if he needs him. He has no doubt Jun figured that in when he called to ask if Mike wanted to go out. Jun's an angles guy.

The condo feels unsettlingly quiet without Mike there, lonely in a way Harvey never remembers it being. At the same time, Mike has made the choice to go out on his own. If Harvey weren't so fucking tired, he *would* go down and meet them, just to have a drink over that fact.

As it is, he appreciates Mike not waking him. He texts Mike: "Bring home an order of patatas bravas, bacalao and olives."

Mike texts back within seconds. "They've got the pears with red wine sauce tonight."

"That too," Harvey texts. It's more than a little gratifying that Mike is clearly paying attention to his phone, when Harvey's the only one who would call at this time of night; also, that Mike knows Harvey's favorite treats.

"Be home in a bit."

And as much as Harvey wants him there, he kind of wants this independence to last as long as it can. "Take your time."

\*

The evening of Mike's birthday—thankfully, Donna actually paid attention to the information on his papers—and one month to the day before Harvey had acquired Mike coincide, bizarrely. Harvey doesn't question this turn of events. Instead, he buys them box tickets to the fifth game in the World Series and calls in a favor from a former client who owns a private jet.

He pulls Mike out of the office at lunch time and has Ray drive them to White Plains. Somewhere on the way Mike looks up from the paperwork he brought with him and asks, "Isn't this kind of far for lunch?"

"Meeting someone," Harvey says.

"Without Jun?"

"I needed him on something else."

Harvey thinks maybe he should have invited Jun, possibly Hui and some of the others. If he weren't selfish, he would have given Mike a birthday party in all its glory. He is, though, and this is something he wants for himself, so here they are.

When they reach the tarmac and Mike gets out behind Harvey, Harvey hears a distinct tone of discomfort in Mike's question, "Where, exactly, is this meeting?"

Harvey turns around. "You afraid of flying?"

Mike eyes the plane warily. "Don't know."

Harvey should have thought about this, but it's been so long since his first flight he's forgotten there was a time when the idea of leaving the ground was both fascinating and horrifying. "Never flown, huh?"

Mike shakes his head. "I can stay and get the—"

"Our pilot is very good. If you don't like looking out the window, you don't have to." Harvey has his palm in the center of Mike's back, though, and is nudging him toward the plane. He's seen the way Mike's curiosity works. Harvey's willing to bet substantial amounts that once Mike has gotten used to the feel of the plane, he'll be engrossed by wanting to know everything, wanting to see every last bit of sky.

It actually doesn't take that long. Once they're on the plane, Mike turns into a kid in a candy store, trying out the different chairs, reading the labels on the drink bottles, flipping the channels on the television. Harvey has to strap him down for takeoff and sure enough, the windows don't spend even a minute behind shades.

Ray has arranged for a car to pick them up and take them to stadium once they land. Mike steps out of the car, blinks at the stadium towering above him and grins. "Hey, you got a client to meet you at a Series game? That's *awesome*. I mean, I know you were pissed about the Yankees—"

"Still am," Harvey reassures him.

"—but even so, this is... I've never been to a baseball game before." Mike grins. "Thanks for bringing me."

Harvey has a moment where he's not sure if he loves the fact that this is Mike's first real game ever, that Harvey is giving that to him, or if it will break him that nobody has ever bothered to include Mike in a baseball outing. He settles somewhere between and leads Mike through the entrance and to their box with a quiet, "You're welcome."

The box is quieter than the outside stadium, and kept at an ambient sixty-eight degrees. There were snacks on the plane, but there are menus sitting on tables facing the field in here. Mike asks, "Are we early?"

"No," Harvey says.

"But—"

"Happy birthday, Mike."

Mike opens his mouth, then shuts it. Finally he asks, "Is it really?"

Harvey nods. "Lose track of time?"

Mike shrugs. "Not, I mean, kind of? But it's more, when I was a kid, Gram would make a cake, but we didn't have money for a party or gifts or anything. After I left home, she'd call on the day, and if I could make it to where she was there would be cake, but after she had to go into care it was just a phone call and I just—" Mike shrugs. "It's just another day, really."

"I take it she hasn't called yet today?"

"Nah, she usually waits until early evening so she can tell me to buy myself dessert." Mike smiles fondly.

"Call her and tell her we'll come by tomorrow for lunch. I'll get you your strawberry shortcake from Lalo's."

Mike's eyes light up at the words "strawberry shortcake" and "Lalo's." So far, Harvey hasn't found anything food-based that makes Mike quite as happy. If he'd really thought it over, he would have brought one with them today, but he's out of practice at planning birthdays for people.

Mike says, "Tomorrow's not my birthday."

Harvey shrugs. "You have a few years to make up for, evidently."

\*

Mike falls asleep mid-sentence on the plane ride back. He's been talking non-stop since the game ended, clearly just trying to process all the input, all the newness. Harvey waits to get annoyed, but it never quite happens, and then Mike drifts off, the excitement finally catching up with him.

Harvey laughs softly and dims the lights. He uses the rest of the flight to work, only waking Mike when they're well and on the ground. Mike still startles awake as a rule, but he orients faster than he used to. He runs a hand through his hair, smiles at Harvey and follows him off the plane.



In the car, Ray tells Mike happy birthday—now that he's allowed—and Mike tells Ray sincerely, "This was like twenty birthdays wrapped in one."

Mike is twenty six, so Harvey figures he's only got six to make up for, in that case. Harvey expects Mike to go back to sleep, but instead he fidgets, so Harvey says, "Spit it out, kid."

"Can I get your advice on something?"

Mike listens to Harvey all the time, but he's never directly asked Harvey for help, not like this. "Shoot."

"Hui asked me out."

Harvey's annoyed by the stab of jealousy that goes through him, even as he experiences an utter dearth of surprise by his reaction or by Hui's move. "What'd you say?"

"That I needed to ask permission."

Okay, Harvey hadn't called that response. He's a little surprised Jun hasn't given him hell. Or, at the very least, hidden all his favorite pens. *Something*. "No. No you don't."

"I...I know. Mostly. Dr. Teng and I talked about it, and it was just—it was the first thing I came up with that would give me some time. Also, it still felt right. I get that that's problematic, but at least I know that, right? That's something."

"Okay," Harvey says, glad that Mike had the forethought to speak to a professional about this. "What did Dr. Teng say?"

"She asked what I wanted."

"And?"

"And I've got no idea, as it turns out." Mike gestures vaguely with his hands. "I decided to shut that off. Four months and three days in, when I was sufficiently obedient, Van Pimp started to make me complicit in a lot of the stuff. The rapes and punishments. Dr. Teng says I should say it, so. He would pick a couple of types of punishment, say, caning or bastinado, and if I picked which one I 'wanted' it wouldn't last as long, and I might get some more recovery time on the end for good behavior."

"Obviously, I'd already determined that my actual desires had no effect on anything, but I couldn't choose, couldn't make decisions that were necessary as a matter of survival if I allowed myself to believe I wanted *anything*. If I didn't, then really, it was just choice a or choice b, an intellectual exercise."

Mike tucks his knees against his chest. "I can do it with little things now, like what I want to eat or wear or whatever. But this isn't little. And I don't know."

Harvey wishes his emotional dysfunction was as strong as Mike's. Then he wouldn't be in this situation, giving a shit. "Come at the problem from a different direction."

"Give me a hint."

"You think she's pretty."

"She *is*."

"And smart."

"Definitely smart."

"And you're comfortable around her and she makes you laugh."

"Check and check."

"What've you got to lose?"

"A friend. If it doesn't go well. If my issues are too much. If we just don't fit. And I haven't exactly got enough of those that I can just be tossing them away. Also, I mean, she's Jun's sister, which could make things awkward and that'd piss you off—"

"Jun's an adult. He'll handle it like an adult. I can't say that he won't side with his sister, but he'll do it in a mature fashion."

"Loss is loss," Mike tells him.

"There's an opportunity cost to everything. The question is if you're too afraid to risk that cost. It's okay if you are; I'm not judging. You've got reason and then some, and you won't always be. But that's still the essential question."

"And my answer is still: I don't know."

"She's given you time. Take it."

Mike ducks his head and then raises it to look at Harvey. "Really not judging me?"

If it were anyone else, Harvey would snark back or smirk. He shakes his head, sharp and decisive. "Not even a little bit."

Mike's, "Thanks," is soft enough that Harvey knows he doesn't want it acknowledged. Harvey lets Mike have what he wants.

\*

Mike goes out on his first date with Hui a couple of weeks later. Harvey stays at the office as late as he can reasonably justify and then picks up a bottle of Shiraz and has Ray take him to Jessica's. Jessica lets him in her house with a roll of her eyes, but she accepts the wine and pours them each a glass. She allows him to bullshit for a while, like he came over here to discuss business and then she says, "Harvey."

"I'll go," he tells her.

"Do me and yourself and probably Mike and Donna and Mr. Qian a favor and go pick up the nicest girl willing to take you home with her."

"I don't really like nice girls," Harvey murmurs, his gaze pointed.

"Out," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

She shoves him physically out the door, but her touch has an underlying support to it that Harvey can feel and knows how to appreciate. It's probably because of that touch that he does what she says, goes and flirts and closes a redhead that maybe looks too much like Donna for true comfort, but at least nothing like Mike.

He leaves her apartment at around four, loose-limbed and sated and more at ease than he's been in a while, certainly than he was earlier in the evening. He texts Jessica a thank you and notices there's a text from Mike, sent around midnight. "Where are you? Everything okay?"

The cab's nearly to his place by that time, so he waits and lets himself into the condo, where Mike immediately startles awake from where he's sleeping, sitting up on the couch. He kind of falls onto his feet and then nearly stumbles getting to Harvey, his eyes wide and borderline panicked. Harvey puts a hand on Mike's chest, spreading his palm wide. "Hey. Hey, sorry, I just got your text."

Mike leans into the hand, and Harvey gives up trying to keep space between them, partially because he doesn't want to, and partially because he knows it'll only take longer to calm Mike down if he doesn't. Mike all-but folds into his body. "I—I didn't know where you were."

"Yeah, kid, got that part." Harvey wonders when he went from being one more representation of the Devil Incarnate to being the only thing standing between Mike and a pretty terrifying world. "You know, just as a...point of interest, I arranged for your papers to transfer to Jessica should anything happen to me in the first week I had them. You'd be safe."

It shouldn't make Harvey as pleased, deep down, as it does that Mike nods but doesn't move away, doesn't loosen his hold on Harvey. Harvey wraps his hand around the back of Mike's neck and rubs a little. "Your date go all right?"

Mike laughs, a little shaky, but amused. "Yeah. We-- She has an extra bike. We rode in the park and ate outside. It was nice. Easy."

"You bike?"

"Used to be how I got everywhere. The car's nice, but I miss it sometimes." Mike's half asleep, Harvey knows, can tell by the slowness of his words, the openness of his answers.

"C'mon," Harvey says, and isn't surprised when Mike lets Harvey lead him wherever Harvey wishes. At the moment, Harvey wishes for bed.

When they're both lying in Harvey's bed, Mike still clinging to Harvey, Mike opens his eyes for a second, squinting. "What—"

"You gonna sleep if I send you back to your room?"

"Probably not," Mike admits after a second.

"Sleep, kid."

"You'll tell me all about your date in the morning?"

Harvey snorts. "When'd you figure it out?"

"The look on your face the second before I started wiggling at you."

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

"Hm," Mike murmurs. "We'll see."

\*

"Do you miss it?" Is what Mike opens up with when he decides he's given Harvey enough private time. Which is to say, time for each of them to shower, dress, and drink a cup of coffee.

"Miss what?" Harvey asks, pouring himself another cup. There was a time in his life when three hours of sleep worked just fine, but that time has long passed.

Mike makes himself physically small, but to his credit, he asks the question: "Dates? Women? The kind of stuff you did before me?"

"The kind of stuff I did before," Harvey states.

"People talk, Harvey. They especially do when they forget you're human, let alone a human with perfect aural recall."

"What do people say?" The question is half genuine curiosity on Harvey's part, half trying to figure out what he should tell Mike.

Mike shrugs. "Legal negotiations aren't the only thing you're good at closing; if she's a size six or less she's fair game, something something slut, something something manwhore. Y'know."

"Louis?" Harvey asks.

"The manwhore one."

"Slut?"

"The senior partner with the scary eyes. I don't know his name."

"Hearndon." Harvey isn't surprised. Hearndon doesn't have anything nice to say about anyone. "And I don't discriminate by size, just so we're clear."

"But you do sleep around. Or you did, before me."

"I've been preoccupied."

"With me," Mike says.

"Among other things. Ego, much?"

Harvey watches Mike consider responding to that. Instead he just repeats, "Do you miss it?"

Harvey thinks about the night before, the carefree note of Alanna's laughter, the length of her legs wrapped around his waist, skin to skin, mouth to mouth, pure energy and aesthetics and easy pleasure. It had been simple, and he'd needed something simple. "Sometimes, yes. But

it's never been something I couldn't do without, if I chose."

"Have you chosen before?"

"Once. My first year at the firm. When there were more important things at stake."

For a second, Harvey thinks Mike will miss the double meaning in the statement. Mike unfurls a bit, though, and Harvey knows he's caught on. Then he says, "Hui and I are going on a second date. Just, uh, so you know."

"Strong work," Harvey tells him. Mike laughs, the sound of it still surprised and rusty and somehow better than carefree.

\*

The next day, Donna asks over the intercom, "Did you order something that was likely to come in the largest box on the planet?"

"Yes," Harvey tells her. "Be there momentarily."

"New office furniture?" Mike guesses, without even looking up from what he's doing.

"This office is perfect the way it is," Harvey says.

"Did you get a miniature steam room for after our games?"

"The sauna works just fine."

"You like steam rooms better."

Harvey never should have started taking Mike along on his morning workouts. "One more word and I'm making you go get the planet's largest box."

"I'm shaking in my boots," Mike tells him, a stupid, proud smile on his face for the fact that it's so obviously a lie.

Harvey needs that smile out of his immediate vicinity before *he* does something stupid. "That's it, I warned you. Go."

"Really?" Mike asks, sounding excited.

"Yes, go. Go relieve Donna of the box."

Harvey does his best to concentrate on the Golden Rule letter he's adding the finishing touches to, even as he can see Mike chatting with Donna, the two of them probably taking their best guesses at what's inside. After a few minutes, Mike pushes the box toward Harvey's office, and with a little creative maneuvering—and a hand from Jun, who was evidently on his way over—gets it inside the office. It really is a very large box.

Harvey spares Jun a glance, but the look on Jun's face tells Harvey that whatever it is can wait the five or so minutes it'll take Mike to get the box open. Harvey tosses Mike the Swiss Army Knife he keeps in his desk. "Happy belated birthday."

Mike catches it, but just barely. The expression on his face is dumbfounded. "My birthday was almost a month ago."

"Hence the 'belated' in that sentence."

"And you got me tickets to a baseball game."

"That was the party, this is the gift. Your birthday awareness needs some brushing up."

Mike looks down at the box. "Harvey."

"Mike."

Mike raises his eyes back up to Harvey's and whatever he sees makes him nod slightly after a few seconds and set to the task of getting the box open. It's a two man job, but Jun steps in to help the process and soon enough Mike has managed to wrestle the content from inside the box. He stands, blinking at it. For the first time since he ordered the gift the day before, Harvey feels uncertain. "Something wrong?"

"This is a Cervelo," Mike breathes, like saying the word too loud might cause lightening to strike him.

"The guy I spoke to said it was a road bike," Harvey explains, "but if you prefer something else—"

"It's a road bike the way that Tesla you have full-frontal fantasies about is a car, Harvey."

"Obviously. If you're going to be suicidal enough to ride a bike in this city, it might as well be the one with the least likelihood of causing death."

Mike stares at him, the wide-eyes that Harvey is learning to recognize as Mike's there's-something-seriously-wrong-with-you face focused on him. "I don't—"

"Now you can come and go when you want. Where you want." And that's the point, really, much more than the technology Mike's currently feeling up or the name brand, it's that now Mike doesn't have to worry about calling Ray, about waiting for rides. The risk involved in an Indebted being out alone doesn't sit well with Harvey, and he knows it's not going to be fun to just let Mike go, but he also knows it has to be done. That Mike needs that choice.

Mike bites his lip. "I hate it when you lawyer me."

"Lawyer you?" Harvey asks innocently.

"Find the one argument you know I can't deny."

"You just need more experience," Harvey reassures him.

"Wow, so not the point."

"I know."

Mike shakes his head, but his lips form the words, "Thank you."

Harvey smirks. "Why don't you go get us all some lunch on your shiny

new bicycle?"

\*

It's easy to fall back into a rough approximation of how things were Before Mike. Harvey has missed flirting, its rhythms and challenges. He's missed being able to prove himself to someone without words. He's missed sex that's actually enjoyable.

The first few times there are moments where Harvey feels as though eyes are on him, and the chill underneath his skin has nothing to do with the temperature in the room. But Harvey is nothing if not perseverant. He ignores his own unease, and soon enough it fades, a bad memory in its proper place, with the rest of the things he has pushed into the catacombs of his mind.

Mike keeps asking for tips late in the night when they converge on the condo or early in the morning, over coffee, until Harvey points out that he's not exactly an expert on actual relationships. Mike seems surprised by this and is quiet for the better part of that morning until he comes up with the brilliant rejoinder, "Never?"

Harvey has a meeting with a client in fifteen minutes. He's prepared but, "Never. Can we talk about this later?"

Mike smiles. "You always get nervous before meetings with Mr. Trenton."

"I'm not nervous," Harvey tells him, making sure to force every speck of dignity he has into the statement.

"Sure, tough guy." Mike snorts, but leaves it alone. If Harvey's office weren't entirely glass, he would make a face at Mike. He takes the high road, though, and just calls him names under his breath. Trenton does make Harvey nervous; mostly because Trenton's eerily like a smarter version of Harvey with only about a fifth of Harvey's ethics. And Harvey doesn't really claim to be the most ethical person in the room, ever. But the firm has been representing Trentons for the better part of three generations, and this particular Trenton has taken a liking to Harvey.

Harvey hates that Mike can read him so well. It suggests he's losing his edge. There is the other option, of course, that Mike is just unnaturally good at that, but Harvey does not feel the clues really lead to that conclusion. He takes one last look at the file he's reviewing and then stands. "I'm going to go do my job."

"Have fun with that," Mike says too-sweetly.

Harvey doesn't dignify the comment with a response. Instead he goes and deals with the latest Trenton Issue—this one involving more cocaine and cameras than Harvey ever likes going together—and then comes back to find either Mike or Donna has ordered lunch. Mike hands him a pair of chopsticks and Harvey sets to mixing just the right amount of wasabi into the pool of soy sauce Mike has poured for him.

Mike breaks the silence with, "It's just. Not even in, like, college?"

"Am I correct in assuming that you're not going to leave this alone?"

"You could order me to."

Harvey controls his anger, because the combination of anger and chopsticks never ends well for anyone. When he's managed he asks, "Would you listen?"

It takes Mike a while to answer. "I suppose it would depend on why I thought you were ordering me. Maybe if I thought it was because you didn't trust me with the information, or just didn't want to include me in that part of yourself. Probably then."

And Harvey gets that Mike has just issued a challenge, that Harvey can choose to tell him to back off, and he will. Instead, Harvey says, "My dad cut out on us when my brother was still in diapers. My mom then went through a series of serious boyfriends that rotated at about the rate of one every two or three years. With the exception of one, they were all abusive bastards, mostly just emotional, but one was a big fan of his fists and belts. By the time I was twelve I had a pretty skewed understanding of and vague suspicion in regard to monogamous, long-term relationships. By the time I was eighteen I had an active avoidance principle."

"Oh." Mike frowns at his tempura as though it has personally insulted him. "Okay."

"You could talk to Donna. She's been in a few and has definite opinions on what women want out of them."

Mike pales a little. Harvey doesn't exactly blame him. He offers, "Or Jun. Jun's probably got some idea."

"It's his sister," Mike says.

Mike has a point, but Harvey's got one, too. "You're asking how to treat her well, though, right? He might actually have extra insight in this case."

"This would be easier if you could just help," Mike mutters.

"I can honestly say that my life's purpose is not to make things easy for you."

Mike chews slowly. When he's swallowed he says, very softly, "Could've fooled me."

Harvey does him the favor of pretending he hasn't heard.

\*

It's the middle of a fairly hellacious week when Donna tells Harvey, "You have lunch with Jessica in fifteen minutes."

"Are we meeting a client?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I'll see if I can—"

"She had me put it on your schedule," Donna interrupts, letting him know that any attempt to get out of this lunch is already doomed to failure.



"Donna, if you know anything—"

Donna shakes her head, sharply, but there's something in her expression that makes Harvey press by way of standing still and waiting. Donna tilts her head slightly. "Good money says it's about Mike."

Harvey narrows his eyes. "Should I ask how you know that?"

"Plausibly deniability is your friend," she tells him, and walks off before he can make the decision himself. She calls back, "*Ten* minutes!"

Harvey racks his brain for anything either he or Mike has done that might have pissed Jessica off, and while there have certainly been minor instances that could have irked her, they've all been Harvey's fault and nothing worthy of an off-site lunch. He considers asking Mike, but it'll just freak the kid out. Instead he tells Mike, "Jessica needs me for a lunch."

Mike raises his eyebrows. "You piss her off again?"

"Why is that everyone's first assumption?" Harvey asks.

"Who else jumped to that conclusion?"

Harvey's not going to admit that it was himself. Instead he ignores the question. "Check that Jun's getting through that brief, would you?"

Mike smiles beatifically. "Enjoy lunch."

Occasionally, Harvey suspects the universe is having a laugh at his expense. He makes sure to have his most carefree expression firmly in place as he leaves the office and when he meets Jessica at her car. She takes one look at him and laughs. "Wow, I haven't thrown you this far off your game in years."

He doesn't argue. Normally, Harvey doesn't mind the pointless exercise that is arguing with Jessica, but he senses he might actually need to save his energies in this instance. He gets in the car behind her and asks, "Where're you taking me?"

"Eleven Madison Park, please," Jessica says, more to the driver than Harvey.

Not that Harvey was feeling particularly at ease before, but he's now close to truly alarmed. "Jess."

Whether it's the nickname that he never, ever uses, or the tone of his voice, something gets her to look at him and say, "What? I can't treat one of my senior partners?"

Harvey doesn't trust easy, but when he bothers, he trusts hard. For all the shit Jessica might like to give him, she's not going to torture him this way. Harvey relaxes just slightly against his seat. "Just so we're clear, the next hour or so that you're about to take up was previously being billed to Norian Corp."

"You can complain to my boss," she tells him dryly, before making him update her on where Norian is in the process of going public.

Jessica orders the tasting menu for each of them and waits until the first course has been served to say, "According to the agreement Nieve drew up, Mike will be legally free and re-established in eight months."

Harvey concentrates on the decorum of silverware, cutting perfect slivers in his hamachi. Jessica taught him the rules of silverware once: which forks to use, which knives, how to hold them. When he's ready, he speaks in an even and calm tone. "Correct."

"Jun has been teaching him Chinese." Jessica's assertion is not a question, but it's not made with her utmost level of confidence, either.

Jun and Hui, actually, but Harvey's relatively certain that's not the point. "Vocabulary is easy for him. He has a rougher time with the different grammar structure, but he likes it."

"Given eight months of actually working at it, where would you say he would be, fluency-wise?"

Mike can already hold slow conversations with Jun when he put his mind to it. Harvey mentally calculates to the extent that he can. "Some level of fluency, if somewhat stilted."

"Vernon and I are opening a satellite in Shanghai," she says quietly, but with an efficiency to her words.

Harvey's not wholly surprised. The firm has a number of business interests there at this point. Vernon Hardman is old-fashioned and more than a little xenophobic, but not so much that he wouldn't be able to see the advantages of having an outpost to watch over those interests. "Sending Anson to head it up?"

Anson Childers appears to be the whitest white man a person would ever meet at first glance, but he grew up largely in Southeast Asia while his father served at different naval bases. He's the firm's leading expert on international business. Jessica nods. "He's taking Vasquez and Cole. We're going to hire some people at the senior associate level as well."

"But that's not why you're telling me this over a two hundred dollar lunch."

There's a beat of hesitation. Harvey doesn't think anyone else would notice it, but Harvey knows her so well, too well. She says, "I want to hire Mike as an independent contractor and post him out there."

Harvey feels the impact of her words in his throat, his stomach. He thinks he shouldn't, he thinks he saw this coming. "Why?"

"Because he has the requisite skills and a very different mindset than anyone else I could hire." She does not say the words quickly, or with any tick of nervousness.

The answer is too easy. "You practice that in front of your mirror?"

"Harvey—"

"Why?" Harvey suspects he shouldn't ask, suspects it reveals too

much. He doesn't care.

She sets her silverware down with consummate care. "Because you both need a fresh start. Because I can give it to you."

Harvey breathes, once in, once out. Tightly, he tells her, "I hate that you are always right."

Quite seriously she tells him, "There are times when I'm not the least bit fond of it myself."

Harvey accepts that, because she means it, and because now, more than ever before, he understands that sometimes being the person someone else needs you to be involves inflicting pain. "I won't make the decision for him. Either way, you have to talk to him."

"I know," she tells him. Which is interesting, because until this moment, Harvey's not sure he knew he wouldn't interfere in something like this. She continues, "But I owed you the courtesy of a warning."

Her faith in him burns. "You've never owed me anything."

She shakes her head, a small, sad smile curving up over her lips. "Okay, kid. Sure."

\*

The rest of the week speeds past in a rush of due diligence and client pseudo-therapy, keeping everyone calm until Norian makes the transition onto the open market. Even Saturday and Sunday are largely lost in a flurry of finalization. It's well into the next week that things begin to settle as Norian's performance proves to be slightly higher than projected and hence, well within the range of what the company—and Pearson Hardman—consider to be acceptable.

Harvey gets dragged to a dinner Friday night with a few of the senior partners who represent Norian's other interests and the Norian board. When he returns home, Mike's bike is there, but the condo is dark. Harvey puts himself to bed and wakes up to the smell of perfection. He doesn't really even have his eyes open by the time he reaches the kitchen, but Mike has heard him coming and poured a cup of coffee with just the right amount of cream.

Harvey takes a couple of sips before asking, "Are you baking something unholy in my kitchen?"

"What are your theological feelings on cheddar and chive soufflé?"

"Heathen," Harvey confirms and returns to his hot and gratifyingly caffeinated beverage.

Mike smiles a little and brings his own coffee around the counter to sit alongside Harvey. There's an easy silence between them while they sip, Mike checking the online Times, Harvey waking up. At some point the oven timer beeps and Mike bustles around a little bit, and then there's a plate in front of Harvey with something that really does tempt him in a manner that cannot be condoned by polite society. He gives into temptation. The first bite melts on his tongue and Harvey decides that there are some things worth eternal damnation.

After the second bite, he asks, "What have I done to merit such a reward? Or, alternatively, what have you done that you would prefer me to be mellow before finding out about?"

Mike doesn't bother denying it. "You give better advice when you're mellow."

Harvey takes another bite, chews it carefully, and swallows. Then he manages to say, "So Jessica did find time to steal you away."

Mike glances at Harvey. "She told you?"

"She likes me." Harvey gives him a half-smile.

Mike's answering expression isn't exactly a smile, but it isn't hostile, either. "Well, that, and you're my owner."

"Only for the next seven and a half months. It wasn't that kind of formality."

Mike pokes at his food. Harvey says, "If you keep abusing your share that way, I'm going to eat it."

Mike slides it over to him. "What do you think?"

Harvey slides the plate back. "I think the correct question is what do *you* think?"

Mike lays down his fork. "I think Shanghai is far away and I've never been further than Tampa Bay, and that was when you took me for the game. I think Gram is here. I think I don't know how to be on my own anymore."

"We've covered then cons, then. What are the pros?"

Mike bites his lip in a way that Harvey thinks might betray a little guilt, although at what, exactly, Harvey's not sure. Mike says, "It'd be a real job that I could, I mean, I could pay you back the rest of the way and get myself on my feet. And Shanghai looks pretty amazing from everything I've read and what Hui and Jun have told me. It'd be an adventure, but one I could get out of, if it went wrong."

"If I said I'd take care of Vivian, in person, and we'd set up the world's best Skype console for the two of you, would that get rid of at least some of your con regarding her?" Harvey has thought about solutions for that, since that aspect was predictable.

Mike takes a bite, which Harvey considers a good sign. After a bit, Mike nods. "It wouldn't be the same. And I'd need to be able to come back for holidays, or something. But. She wouldn't want me to turn something like this down."

"No," Harvey says quietly. "She wouldn't."

Mike pins him with a stare. "And you? What do you want?"

Harvey has avoided asking himself that question since Jessica and he spoke, but now, with Mike asking, it's as though he has no control over his own emotions. He wants, of course, to say no. To say they'll figure out something else, something not quite so far, something that keeps them within touching distance.

He also knows better. Jessica might not be precisely an objective third party, but she's also not wrong. Carefully, he tells Mike, "I want you to do what's best for you."

"Harvey—"

"But I think, in this instance, that taking the opportunity is what's best." The words are sharp in Harvey's mouth, and he feels like he should taste copper and iron and heat.

"I-- Okay," Mike says, and Harvey can't parse his expression at all, there's too many things happening at once on Mike's face. Harvey suspects—and it's just a bit reassuring—that Mike doesn't know quite how he's feeling, either.

\*

Three weeks later, Harvey and Mike stop to grab a bite of dinner on a Wednesday evening to celebrate Harvey landing a pretty serious account, and somewhere between the appetizers and coffee, Mike gets drunk. Harvey hasn't really been paying attention to the number of times Mike has grabbed the wine bottle, too busy considering all the finalities that need to be seen to.

Mike saying, "I think I should break up with Hui," all loose vowels and soft consonants, shakes Harvey from his preoccupation.

Harvey lifts the wine bottle. It's empty. He signals for another one and asks, "Any specific reason?"

"She deserves better."

"Did she say or otherwise intimate that?" Harvey doubts it, but there will be no saving her if she did.

Mike blinks. "No. *No*."

Harvey almost laughs. He manages not to just in time. "Okay, so you came to that asinine conclusion on your own. Color me unshocked."

Mike scowls at him, but it's more defeated than confrontational. "We—we've been kissing."

The bottle of wine arrives and Harvey pours himself a full glass. "As a generalization, women enjoy that with the men they're dating."

"She rolled onto me. Last—couple of nights ago."

Harvey thinks back and remembers Mike coming back to the office in a cab, saying something about having had too much caffeine. Harvey had known something was off at the time. Mike's a bad liar, and Harvey knows him all too well. Harvey'd pushed it off, though, because there were other things to worry about. "You were too upset to ride home."

"It was like at first. I cringed and I'm not sure, maybe pleaded a little. It took her a while to get me to...snap back. I don't know how long, but time had definitely passed." Mike is looking anywhere but at Harvey.

Quietly, Harvey asks, "Was she unsettled?"

"A little. Apologetic, which I didn't want. It wasn't her."

Harvey winces internally. Oh does he ever know that feeling. "Have the two of you talked, since?"

Mike nods. "She called the next day. She didn't bring it up until later in the conversation, like it wasn't the only reason she'd called."

"Maybe it wasn't. People have issues, Mike. Trust me, Hui's aware you're no different."

"I *am* different. Issues are one thing. Psychological trauma is something entirely else."

Harvey can't really deny the truth of that. "Did you talk with Dr. Teng about it?"

"Yes," Mike admits, clearly somewhat reluctantly.

"What did she say?"

"She asked if I stayed long enough after coming to to actually talk things out with Hui."

"And?"

"I was pretty busy needing to die of embarrassment somewhere safe," Mike admits.

Harvey only allows himself a second to process the fact that Mike's "somewhere safe" is evidently Harvey's office. "So, no?"

"No."

"And Dr. Teng said to try that, next time?" Harvey pushes, just a bit, because he's gotten pretty good at knowing when he should.

Mike nods. "Along with a few other things."

"Then why are we having this conversation? She's a professional at this sort of thing, you realize?"

Mike glares, then. "Because maybe I need an opinion that isn't professional. Maybe I need to talk to someone who's probably let women do whatever the hell they wanted to him and only ever walked away satisfied."

Harvey realizes Mike's anger shouldn't make him feel better, but it does. "Mike—"

Mike's breath hitches and his voice is low and rough as he interrupts. "She's so pretty, and soft, which is different, nothing about—there was never softness, and it's stupid that I—"

"Stop."

Mike stops. He bites his lip to make himself do it, but he stops. Harvey says, "It's not stupid. Frustrating, probably. Natural, unavoidable, inexorable, unquestionably. But not stupid. The only stupid thing you could do right now would be to run out on her, when she has no desire

to run out on you and you don't actually *want* anything to end."

"It *feels* stupid."

"No. It feels scary. But you're not a coward."

"You sound so certain," Mike mutters.

"It's easy to be certain when you're always right," Harvey tells him, using the mask of confidence he's built up over so, so long. It pays off when Mike rolls his eyes, but also chuckles, short and reluctant and amused.

\*

It's nearly seven when Donna pads into Harvey's office, her shoes probably still at her desk, feet bare against his carpet. Harvey asks, "Mike still with Jun?"

"They were meeting Hui for a Chinese lesson over dinner."

"That what the kids are calling it these days?"

"If so, I need to start pursuing a foreign language." Donna seats herself on the couch, swinging her legs up in front of her.

"You need something?" He tries to sound annoyed, but he suspects he only manages tired.

"Moping, Harvey Specter, is not a good look on anyone, but it is particularly unattractive on you."

Harvey pulls his attention away from the deposition he's prepping and cants his head. "I'm moping, you say?"

"I do say, and you know it, so save both of us the time we would otherwise spend arguing about it." Her expression is pointed and dares him to try and argue.

Harvey doesn't have the energy. "And just what am I moping about?"

"The looming departure of your favorite pet."

"Don't," Harvey growls instinctively, not sure if he's warning her off calling Mike that, or just plain warning her off.

She gives him an unimpressed look. "He's not gone yet."

"I'm well aware. He sits in my office more than ten hours a day."

She raises an eyebrow. "And yet, you continue to act as though he is."

"That's—"

She cuts his protestation off. "Ask yourself this: what is it that you want that you're not getting?"

*Mike.* The answer is automatic and true, but not the whole truth and Harvey knows it. Because he doesn't want Mike like this, not really. Harvey might not want Mike called his pet by anyone, but Harvey's all

too aware that the way they interact has levels of power that no relationship should ever rightly have. So what he wants is a Mike who was never Van Kindt's and never Harvey's. Or maybe even Van Kindt's, if it would mean Mike is who he is, but certainly not Harvey's. Harvey's a realist, though, and does his best not to wish for things that can't be. "Nothing in the realm of the possible."

"Wow," Donna says. "When did you become such a quitter?"

It grates, but then, most of what Donna tells him that is actually useful does. "I'm not the only person involved, you realize?"

"No, and in six and a half months, your little caterpillar is going to leave his safe cocoon and go blossom like the beautiful butterfly he is on the far shores of Shanghai, but that is *six and a half months* from now, and people who leave sometimes come back."

"Donna—"

"Shut up, Harvey. Until now, with him, it's always been about helping him find his feet again. And I'm not saying that wasn't a worthwhile goal, because it clearly was. But Jessica's given him a chance to do that on his own. Now's the time to make things between you about who you are and who you could be to him as a separate, non-dependent entity."

Harvey stares at her, a little gobsmacked. "You're telling me to woo him."

Donna shrugs. "I'm telling you to make him see what he'll be missing."

"He's with Hui."

"He needs a *friend*, Harvey. For that matter, *you* need a friend. Not everything is about sex or promises or so-called wooing."

Harvey knows that, truly, because he's never wanted promises, not ever, or at least, not for so long he can't remember a time when he did. But now he wants that, and nothing short of it seems an acceptable substitute. Then again, between Mike as a friend and no Mike, well, Harvey knows which choice he'll make. Quietly, Harvey tells her, "I'm not actually certain as to how to do this. You and Jessica, really, in both cases I just got lucky."

Donna smiles, bittersweet and darkly amused. "Is that what you think?"

Harvey shrugs. "Jessica found me cleaning bathrooms on the sixteenth floor and saw something in my work ethic that made me a worthwhile investment. After I'd been around long enough I think she figured it wasn't worth the energy of *not* liking me. You got assigned to me randomly and were smart enough to see under all the bravado."

For once, it is Donna who looks taken aback. "Twenty-plus years of friendship and you've never once asked Jessica what she saw."

Harvey spreads his hands. "All that's important is that she saw it."

Donna's smile is enigmatic, and a little sad. "She saw a boy who did the dirtiest jobs thoroughly, even though he thought nobody was watching. She saw a kid who knew power when he saw it, and respected it, but



didn't cower underneath it. She saw a young man who was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, but still managed to find humor in the world around him. She saw someone she admired, someone she *still* admires, and not for his ability to close a client. That's just a bonus."

Harvey is staring at her, he can feel it, but he can't stop. "How do you know that? And don't tell me you know everything. I mean how did you learn that?"

"You don't think I spoke with Jessica when you brought me on board? That I found out what the boss's boss was like?"

"She wouldn't have just—"

And now Donna's smile is broad and sincere and still somehow devious. "No. Oh no. I said, 'There's something inside him, something true and real and different from all the other assholes out there, and if you ruin that, I swear nobody will hear your screams, nor will they ever find the body.' And she laughed and told me a story about a nineteen year old boy with floppy hair and bright eyes and dimples and a mouth that needed a good scrubbing."

"You shouldn't have—"

"Don't. Don't presume to tell me in what ways I'm allowed to protect you. It's not your right."

"That's ridiculous."

She stares him down for a moment. "Have you done any less for Mike? Would you?"

"Mike doesn't have legal personhood," Harvey protests.

"You're telling me that instinct will just die away in six and a half months? Really?"

"My point—"

She waves said point off even as she interrupts. "Is that you let yourself believe your actions in regard to him are all about the legal and psychological ramifications of his situation, but in truth, it's that he's long been someone you considered important, and the people who are important to you enjoy a sphere of protection. The same goes for me."

Silence settles between them for a bit. Harvey asks, "Why am I arguing with you?"

"Because you occasionally need to feel the sting of a loss?" she guesses.

"Not really."

She offers, "Because you enjoy furthering my sense of deity-like omniscience and wisdom?"

"Probably closer to the mark."

Donna grins and stands up, walking to him. She drops a kiss on his head. "Six and a half months, Harvey."

He watches her go. His mind has already begun planning by the time the door shuts behind her.

\*

With Donna willing to assist in whatever nefarious plans Harvey is able to come up with, it's just a matter of time before Harvey is in his element. The list of things he knows about Mike is annoyingly short, given how long they've lived together, worked together and otherwise spent time in each other's pockets, but he has enough to work off of. That Saturday morning, Harvey asks Mike, "Got any plans?"

Mike shakes his head. "Hui's working, Jun's probably sleeping the sleep of the just, or possibly grocery shopping, and we, miraculously, don't have anything that can't wait until Monday."

It's less of a miracle and more of a concerted effort on Harvey's part that causes this to be true, but Harvey isn't going to let Mike in on that fact. "Feel like going for a bike ride?"

Mike blinks. "Um. Have you ever actually been on a bike?"

Harvey grins at Mike's genuine uncertainty. "How do you think I got around in college? Law school?"

Mike still looks like he's not one hundred percent on board with this plan. "Not to suggest that you are, in any way, elderly, but wasn't that a while ago?"

Harvey feels the sting of the comment in a way that surprises him, both because he knows Mike didn't mean it that way, and because he's not used to caring what other people think of him. "Gonna show me how it's done, youngster?"

Mike hedges, "Harvey, I really—"

"Do you believe me when I tell you that you can trust me not to put myself in situations wherein I will either a, look ridiculous, or b, cause serious injury or maiming to my person?"

Mike considers. "You have a point."

"Okay. Then let's go for a ride."

Harvey's bike is an old-fashioned Huffy, bought second hand while he was at NYU. He's kept it in good shape out of nostalgia and the driving need, instilled by a youth of relative poverty and neglect, not to mistreat his property. He only ever rides it for pleasure anymore, generally in the early spring, safely on bike trails. It's not fancy, but it's endearingly retro and Harvey can tell Mike is just a little bit in love at first sight.

He offers, "Wanna switch for the day?"

Mike trails a finger along the handlebars and says, "It's not that I don't love mine."

Harvey likes the way Mike sounds when he's grateful. It's no longer frantic, just genuine. He tells Mike, "I know, kid. It's just a day."

Mike takes him up on it, and they head out, Harvey taking the lead, the map Donna created for him saved in his phone, which is in turn strapped to his arm. It's about three miles to the first used bookstore. Harvey pulls up, waiting for Mike to stop behind him. He padlocks their bikes and takes Mike inside. It's a hole in the wall type shop, books crammed everywhere, only the vaguest hint of organization.

Mike's eyes go wide, his expression turning ravenous. Harvey tells him, "Take your time. We've got all day."

Harvey has a number of people skills, but one of his absolute best is the ability to watch a person without letting on that he's watching. Because of this, he's able to pick out all the books Mike has spent a particular amount of time yearning over, and have the clerk ship them to his apartment.

They do three bookstores over the course of the morning, before Harvey follows the map to a burger dive that Donna loves. One bite in and Harvey has to acknowledge Donna's consummate taste. Mike gets to the end of his burger and asks, "Can I-- Do we have time for me to order another one?"

If Harvey lives one million years—every single one of them with Mike—he knows he's never going to be able to tell him he can't eat more, not even if Mike finds his way to obesity. In Harvey's mind, there will always be an echo of Mike the way he saw him first, drawn from sharp lines and paper-thin skin. "All the time in the world."

In the afternoon, the map takes them to a couple of thrift shops where Harvey loves to search for records he hasn't yet managed to acquire. He takes Mike through the rows, admitting for the first time aloud that the reason he started listening to Ma Rainey was because Jessica had her on in the car the first time Harvey ever rode somewhere with her. Mike doesn't laugh, just nods, and asks Harvey what his first LP was, if Harvey still has it.

"Jimmy Rogers's 'Walking by Myself,' mostly for Horton's harmonica solo. And yes."

Mike smiles, a little to himself. "It was a stupid question. I know everything you've got in your collection."

"I could have replaced it at some point."

Mike shakes his head. "You take good care of your stuff."

Harvey's not sure if there's a double meaning to that, not sure he wants to know. Instead, he talks about the time he saw Muddy Waters in concert, and Mike listens in that way he has, where you can tell he's not only paying attention, but filing the information away for later.

There's another bookstore waiting for them on their way home, and Harvey thinks he should consider shelving for Mike's room, given how many books he's surreptitiously shipped back to the condo over the course of the day. There's time enough to talk with Mike about what he'd like to do with them when they actually come, though.

By the time they get back to the apartment the sun is setting, and Harvey is ready for abundant hot water, a glass of wine, and schwarma from the place that Harvey knows the phone number to, but has yet to

ever witness in person. Mike agrees to that plan easily, and the two of them find themselves on the sofa, Mike flipping lazily through the channels as they wait for delivery.

It's a quiet night, both of them worn out from the extensive biking, loose and lazy in the wake of the hot water and Bordeaux. When they've had dinner and stuck the leftovers in the fridge, Harvey simmers some Ghirardelli cocoa powder into milk and serves up glasses of hot chocolate.

Mike says, "I didn't know you could do anything in the kitchen," but his tone is amused, not insulting.

"Don't get used to it."

"Course not." Mike takes the last few sips and sets his cup aside, lying down on the couch. He's asleep within seconds.

Harvey covers him in the nearest throw, turns the lights down and murmurs, "I had a good time today."

Then he goes and gets in his bed. For all his exhaustion, he hasn't felt this ready to sleep in ages.

\*

Harvey's doorman has a key to his place for the purpose of allowing deliveries to be placed inside the condo, rather than Harvey having to haul them up there himself. So it is that when he and Mike finally get home at around ten-thirty Tuesday night, there are six boxes sitting right beyond his front door. Harvey manages to avoid them. Mike trips, but Harvey catches him, straightening him. He snickers. "Careful."

"You could have warned me."

"This way was funnier," Harvey says, unrepentantly. He flips on the lights. "Huh, they're all addressed to you."

Mike, who has been heading to his room, pivots back around. "What?"

Harvey points at the label on one of the boxes. "Mike Ross. That is you, correct?"

"Strange, because I haven't ordered anything." Mike does not move from where he's standing, a good ten feet from the boxes.

"Need something sharp?" Harvey grabs a knife from the kitchen and brings it back out.

Mike makes no move to take it. "Harvey. I didn't order anything."

"So you've mentioned. Open the boxes. It's mail fraud for me to, and you wouldn't want me to be in trouble with the law, now would you?"

"Technically, it's not mail fraud, as there would have to be a recipient with the standing of legal personhood for that to kick in."

Mike hasn't brought up his status in a while. For no reason Harvey could verbally explain if pressed, he feels thrown by it, a little bit more breakable than he usually is. He lets the hand with the knife drop back

to his side. "Would you prefer I opened them?"

Mike runs a hand over his face and when he looks up at Harvey, there's so much exhaustion writ large on his face, Harvey is tempted to tell him to forget it, just go to bed. But Harvey's never gotten what he wanted by going easy on anyone, least of all himself, and he's on a tight schedule here. As such, he waits, and is rewarded—for certain definitions of the term—by Mike asking, "Does it really matter?"

"Does what really matter?"

"What I prefer."

Harvey barely manages a, "Yes," but he does manage it.

"Then send them back. Whatever they are, send them back."

"Why?"

"I thought my preferences mattered," Mike challenges, his voice shaky, but his tone clear.

"That doesn't mean mine don't."

Mike opens his mouth, but Harvey isn't done. "Before any of this, what was your reaction when a friend bought you a gift?"

Slowly, Mike admits, "To say thank you."

"Even if you didn't like it?"

"Sure. Then re-gift. Common courtesy."

Harvey starts to speak, but this time it's Mike who cuts him off. "And I see where you're going with this, but it's not the same thing."

"Because I'm not your friend?" Harvey asks, wanting it out there, instead of pulsing and angry between them.

"Because these aren't gifts. These are... These are you spoiling me because I've had it a little rough."

It's unimportant at the moment, but it strikes Harvey that Mike causes his brain to short circuit more than anyone Harvey has ever met, up to and including Donna and Jessica. "There are so many problems with that statement I'm literally unsure where to start."

"Pick somewhere," Mike tells him, clearly unsympathetic.

Harvey has always been one to tackle the hardest parts of a problem first, so he starts with, "I'm allowed to spoil you if I want, because from my perspective you are my friend, and friends are allowed that privilege."

Waiting for Mike to speak after that is one of the hardest things Harvey has ever done in his life, and there have been moments where Harvey has had it—as Mike would say—a "little" rough. But Harvey cannot remember the last time he opened himself to someone like this, admitted where he was and gave them the chance to rip his scant human comforts away from him.

Mike slumps a little. "Dr. Teng tells me it's okay to want your friendship, so long as I don't trade parts of myself for it, or manipulate you to get it."

Harvey swallows. "But?"

"But it's still complicated. Sometimes I find myself doing things because I want to make you happy and I can't tell if that's because I think it will make things easier for me or if it's just because I like seeing you happy. And if I don't even know that, how are you supposed to know? It's not exactly the stuff of friendships, always having to wonder at the others' motives."

Although he will deny it to just about anyone, Harvey is a careful person, particularly when the stakes are high. He keeps his tone even, but he can feel the way he steps gingerly, saying, "Is it not enough for me to trust you? Friendship isn't always ideal. Sometimes we have to be the one doing the heavy lifting. It's not forever."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"About you, or about friendship in general?" Harvey knows he doesn't exactly come off as an expert.

"Me. You have friends. You just hide it well."

"Because the person you are now isn't the person you were when I first met you, or six months after that. Because there have been times when Jessica's had to do it for me, and I for her. Because that's how people who are worthwhile function."

"You seem terribly certain I fall into that category of worthwhile."

Harvey tells Mike something he had planned on never telling him. "I would have sold you if you weren't."

Mike's eyes widen. Harvey flinches, but he continues. "I would've been careful about it, but I-- I'm not, at heart, a nice person. Not like that."

"If a scar runs deep enough, or scabs over enough times, you can't really feel that area of your skin, you know?"

Harvey follows the analogy. "Don't make me into someone I'm not, kid."

"I'm pretty sure you're my friend," Mike says softly. "Even with all the psychological scarring."

Harvey takes a moment to enjoy the win, sweeter than any court victory he's had in a long, long time, maybe ever. Then he moves on: "If that's so, it's my right to tell you that you've had it more than a little rough, and the universe might owe you a little spoiling."

Mike shakes his head. "To what end? To make me forget what being on my own is really like? You can't want me to stand on my own two feet and then keep giving me excuses not to."

Harvey stares at Mike until Mike asks, "What? It's a logical—"

"Evidently Dr. Teng and I both missed an implicit assumption on your behalf."

"And that is?"

"Being independent isn't the same as being *alone*. I want you to be able to make your own decisions and live your own life. I don't want you to feel like you can't call me or Jun or Donna or Gram or Hui if you need some help."

Mike's expression would be comical if it weren't so damned heartbreaking. Harvey all-but-pleads, "Just open the damned boxes, kid."

"No, I mean-- Not no to the boxes, although, they have to wait. You... After I pay the contract off, it's okay for me to call?"

When Harvey was fourteen, he got into a fight with the guy his mom was sleeping with at the time. The guy was twice his size and slightly inebriated. Harvey took a knee to the stomach, as well as a few other things by the time it was all over. He blocked the sensation of his breath being taken away from him, his bones being pushed inward, years ago. Right now, though, it's as if no time has passed. He has to force himself to take a breath. "What on earth would make you think otherwise?"

Mike wraps his arms over his chest. "Gram's family, Harvey. I'm the only thing she's got left that reminds her of her son. She helps when she can because I'm practically her kid and she loves me. That's the reason I can depend on her to the extent that she can help with anything anymore.

"You took my contract because you're human and you kept it, as far as this conversation tells me, because I was interesting to you, and because you figured I would grow out of my neediness. But that doesn't--" Mike bites off his words, swearing quietly under his breath. "Friends are people you call when you need help moving. Not when you're terrified in the middle of the night, or have a problem you can't solve yourself."

Harvey feels like someone declared today opposite day without telling him. "That's actually the definition of a friend, Mike."

Mike bites his lip. His gaze is full of questions, like he's trying to puzzle out why Harvey would lie to him about this.

Harvey sighs. "We're both tired. Let's just--"

"Can I?" Mike moves closer, gently taking the knife from Harvey, careful in his actions.

Harvey turns to watch as Mike saws open the first box and peers inside to see the four books packed atop all the others. He's almost numb from the sheer overexposure to emotions, from the delicate silence that seems to envelope the condo.

Mike runs a hand over one of the covers. "You were watching."

"I find you interesting," Harvey says.

"I don't know how to say thank you to you."

Harvey suspects that comment has little, if anything, to do with the

books. "Don't. I don't need to hear it." That's not how things usually work for Harvey, but just now, it is the truth.

"I'm tired," Mike murmurs.

"Me too," Harvey tells him, and pulls Mike to his feet.

\*

In Harvey's mind, the sequence of events unfolds like this: 1. Mike agrees to accept the books. 2. Mike helps Harvey pick out shelves that will look nice and house said books. 3. Mike schedules an interim meeting with Dr. Teng—in between his normal weeklies—and returns needing some time on the court. 4. Mike is unusually aggressive while playing. 5. The shelves arrive. 6. Mike spends that night at Hui's for the first time ever.

Technically, Harvey isn't certain these events are all related to each other, but a significant part of his job is drawing unlikely connections where other people wouldn't see them. He's not used to trusting his instincts in his personal life, but he's not used to *anything* that involves Mike, so he's starting to expect this feeling of being adrift.

Mike texts Harvey to say he's staying at Hui's. It's not as if Harvey's stuck on his couch waiting up. It's not as if Harvey *would* wait up on the couch. He's decently sure he wouldn't. The fact that he stays up until two is purely the fault of WCNY's fault for rerunning *Ken Burn's Baseball*. Harvey can never stop once he starts watching.

Harvey blames the lack of sleep and his connection-drawing habit for his amazingly unsubtle approach to the situation the next morning. Mike's at the office early, in the suit he keeps at the office for nights where he and Harvey have found it easier to stay than bothering going home just to turn around. There is nothing improper in his behavior. He's even brought Harvey coffee. All things being equal, there's no rational reason for Harvey to open up with, "Is this about the bookshelves?"

Mike frowns. "Is *what* about the bookshelves?"

"You staying out all night. What else has happened in the last twenty four hours that's different than any other day?"

"Well, from my perspective, quite a bit, since me staying out all night was a preventative measure against death seeing as how Hui and I got a little drunk and I actually made it to second base without wiggling out, but didn't think I could safely bike back to your place."

There's a lot happening in that sentence. Harvey suspects he needs to respond to the right parts in order for this not to turn into a Victorian comedy of errors. Harvey hates those even more than he hates drama. "Second base, huh?"

Mike grins. "Don't tell Hui I told. She could totally kick my ass."

Harvey doesn't really think Hui would mind, not if she could see the expression on Mike's face, part kid in a candy shop, part holy reverence. "Your secret is safe."

"Bookshelves? Really?"



"You did meet with Dr. Teng twice in one week after ordering them."

"I needed an outside perspective," Mike says with great dignity.

"Not really helping your case," Harvey murmurs. "How drunk is a 'little'? Is it akin to your definition of 'a little rough'?" Because if it is, Harvey's actually amazed Mike *remembers* making it to second base."

"We shared a bottle of wine. Before eating. I could still make cogent and considered arguments. I know, because Hui's dealing with an ethical breach of one of her superiors and she was asking for my thoughts."

"Your version of pillow talk is fascinating."

If anything, Mike's grin just gets bigger. Harvey rolls his eyes, but he can't help smiling. "I take it second base was enjoyable?"

"I have no idea," Mike admits. "I was too busy being excited I'd gotten there."

Harvey's not sure exactly what the expression on his face is, but it makes Mike pause. He makes a face. "I, uh, should make that up to Hui."

"Probably," Harvey agrees.

"I'd ask what you do after failed sexual attempts, but I have a feeling that's out of your area of expertise." Mike looks so miserable, it's all Harvey can do not to laugh, or squeeze him, or both.

Harvey gives himself a mental shake. "I don't think she was disappointed, Mike."

"No, I don't, I mean-- She seemed content. But that's not..." Mike bites his lip. "I think I'm going to have to brave Donna."

It's then that Harvey experiences the flash of jealousy he's kept expecting. He thinks if Hui knew the ways Mike is willing to be brave for her, there would be no need to make anything up. He wonders if she already does, if Mike shook when they went further, if Hui whispered, "Hey, you've got this," or something else encouraging.

Harvey pinches the inside of his wrist. Even if he'd been a voyeur—and he hadn't—his Van Kindt experiences would have cured him of that. He looks out at Donna and waits until she glances up. He doesn't even have to mouth, "Come in," before she's getting up, moving toward the office.

She waits for the door to close behind her to ask, all too sweetly, "You beckoned?"

Mike glares at Harvey, hissing, "I didn't mean *now*."

"No time like the present," Harvey replies smoothly, mostly to annoy Mike into greater confidence but also because it's true.

Mike turns to Donna and shifts from foot to foot. Harvey can tell Donna's seconds away from taking pity on him when Mike stutters out, "Um, if a guy that you were-- If you were dating someone and he

wasn't, you know, up to your...standards in a, uh, certain capacity, could he do anything to get you to not, um—"

"Dump his ass?" Donna asks, tilting her head and regarding Mike with something less than infinite patience.

Mike shrugs. Harvey's kind of fascinated by the color Mike has turned. It's an amalgam of purple and red that Harvey has never actually seen on a human. Donna's voice is softer when she says, "Kid. Look at me."

Mike does as bid, even if there's a side of skittishness to it. Donna smiles, a slight upward tilt of her lips, her eyes warm. "Make her breakfast and take it slow next time."

Mike looks doubtful. "That's it?"

For all the years Harvey has known Donna, it's rare that he can read her easily; she's too complex, too guarded for that. This is one of those moments, though, in the way she tucks her hair behind her ear, the way she presses her lips together. She says, "Really, that's it."

He hears, *the rules are different for you*. He wishes he didn't agree as much as he does.

\*

Harvey finds himself watching Mike settle into his skin again. Harvey lingers a little longer when he accompanies Mike to visit Vivian, wondering if she sees it too, wondering if Mike looks so very different than he did Before. Harvey's sure there's a way to ask without giving up too much information, but he hasn't quite figured it out.

By silent agreement Mike and he find themselves setting aside at least a few hours out of every week to bike or watch a movie they both like or play strategy board games, which Harvey accidentally discovers Mike has a weakness for after a bike outing in Central Park and a chess incident Mike refuses to speak about. There's always basketball on Thursdays, and the days when cases get the better of both of them and bleed into nights and then the next morning. Sunday mornings are reserved for Mike's cooking and hiding in the condo as long as life will allow.

Harvey gets used to the nights when Mike stays over at Hui's. At some point, she sends Harvey a Flickr link of pictures of her and Mike having a snowball fight in what has to be a schoolyard. There aren't any kids around, Harvey thinks it might be late. He has no idea who the photographer is, maybe Jun, or one of Hui's coworkers. It doesn't really matter, except for how he wishes he had someone who could catch Mike smiling like that, even if not at him. He prints the pictures, keeping his favorite for himself and leaving the rest on Mike's bed. He notices two of them in double-sided frame on Mike's nightstand a week later.

He lets Mike teach him bits and pieces of the Chinese in which Mike's becoming annoyingly fluent. Mike sometimes makes faces, but he doesn't laugh at Harvey's accent or when he gets words wrong. It's a sort of kindness in pedagogy that Harvey's never experienced and it can be hard to take at times, but Harvey has decided he will take what Mike gives him and not complain. This situation is no different.

The rhythm between them is so damned *easy* that Harvey wakes up one morning blindsided by the fact that he's got a month before another transfer gets deposited into his account and Mike climbs on a plane to take him halfway across the world. It's a Wednesday when he realizes this.

He has Jessica's permission to take a few days off—and drag Mike with him—by three that afternoon. He's drafted Donna to help with travel plans less than twenty minutes later. He takes Mike over to Vivian's place at around five, grabbing a break so that he can tell her, and by extension, Mike, "I'm kidnapping your grandson for a few days."

Vivian looks unimpressed. "You already keep him locked away in that glass tower you call a workplace on a regular basis. This is different, how?"

Mike hides his face behind his hands, which is a sure sign he's laughing. If they were alone, Harvey would peel his hands away. As it is, Harvey concentrates on Vivian, "He likes history. I thought I'd take him to Gettysburg, then over to Hershey."

Mike's hands have come away from his face, and he's staring at Harvey. "What?"

"Your reading has themes to it," Harvey tells him, unrepentant. Mike is also a big fan of Revolutionary War history, but Harvey made the executive decision that Gettysburg had more emotive significance. Hershey was Donna's suggestion, since it served the double function of providing fattening sustenance for Mike and offering a fair slice of American corporate and communal history, while being within driving distance of Gettysburg.

"We're going on a...vacation?" Mike says the word like it's a foreign concept.

Harvey glances over at Vivian, who's watching Mike, something soft and sad in her expression. She says, "It's been a while since you did that, I suppose?"

Harvey doesn't miss Mike's effort to force a smile on his face. "Last time was with you, Gram. The Falls."

Her, "Like I said, a while," almost makes Harvey glad he doesn't feel comfortable asking how long.

Mike just widens his smile. "You gonna be okay? You've got our numbers, if anything—"

"Enjoy yourself, Michael Aiden Ross, that's an order. This place you're putting me up at has got to be nicer than anywhere you've ever lived."

Mike's smile softens at that, forming itself into something real. "You just say that because you haven't seen where I'm living."

"Whose fault is that, exactly, for not bringing pictures?"

"I take your point."

She tells him, "I do fully expect you to bring me back chocolate." She turns to point her finger at Harvey, including him in this instruction.

Harvey nods. "Yes, ma'am."

Mike says, "Wouldn't dream of not doing so," and stands up to lean into her, catch her up in a hug.

\*

It's too cold for the traditional crowds that the historic park at Gettysburg commands in the summer, but not so cold that Harvey and Mike aren't able to do the walking audio tour. Harvey offered to drive them in the car he rented, but Mike had made noises about Harvey doing what he wanted and Mike meeting him afterward, so Harvey knew that wasn't the way Mike would choose to experience the site.

Mike listens to the audio, nodding along at facts Harvey suspects he already knows. When the last of the tour falls silent, Mike takes the headphones off and stands in the early spring air, his breath still visible. Harvey's about to ask what he's thinking when Mike speaks up. "You ever read 'The Killer Angels'?"

Harvey shakes his head. "Not much of a historical fiction person."

"I read it when I was a kid. Thirteen, I think. And it, I mean, when they taught us about the War in school, it was always about wrong and right, slavery and freedom, black and white."

Harvey doesn't actually remember that much Civil War History, but in a normative sense, he can agree with Mike's assessment. "South and North."

"Only that book was the first time I'd really thought about the War, so it stuck with me, this idea that really it was about people and ways of living and money and other things that we don't like to talk about because they're messy and because they suggest that the North wasn't quite so righteous and the South not *always* wrong and just, there was more to the story."

Mike starts to walk again, back toward the visitor center. Harvey follows a couple of steps behind him. Curious as to what child-Mike was like, surpassing all of his classmates and probably cognitively ahead of most of his teachers. "Did you argue with your teachers?"

"Nah, not-- I was the youngest kid in class by a lot by then. I preferred to stay out of the way."

Harvey has a moment to decide which direction he wants to go with this, what he wants to know most. He chooses, "What does it mean now? The book?"

Mike kicks at a stone in his path. "When I made the decision to sell myself, I thought about it a lot, that book. About how nothing was simple and people with problematic beliefs weren't necessarily bad, just...socialized in troubling ways, and I told myself I could survive if I could just see all the facets, understand why the current system was in place rather than something else, something more, I don't—compassionate, I guess."

It takes Harvey a second, but he catches on. "You didn't account for the fact that a system might be complicated, but it allows for genuinely bad people to take advantage of that."

"Gram always said we all have a purpose on this earth. The philosophies were mutually exclusive."

"Not really. Purpose does not imply *good* purpose."

Mike presses his lips together. "I-- I suppose. But it had always seemed to imply that."

"Brilliant or no, you were still a kid." Twenty-three at the time of the sale, to be precise, which makes Harvey sick to his stomach every time he stumbles upon thinking about it. "Kids have faith, even where they maybe shouldn't."

"I tried." Mike makes a face. "I tried to keep believing. What Gram had said, what I'd thought about the world, whatever. I tried, because, if I could believe it, then it made sense, right? What was happening made sense. Maybe not to me, but somehow it did."

*I should have taken him to Disney World.* The thought feels like it should be a joke, but jokes aren't heavy and sharp. The thought is. Softly, uselessly, Harvey tells him, "Bad things happen to good people, Mike. And vice versa."

"That's not—" Mike shakes his head. "What happens if I don't sell myself, Harvey? I can't take care of Gram and I never meet you or Hui or Jun or Donna and I probably die in a gutter somewhere, right?"

Harvey frowns. He's never thought about it. He's been a bad person more times than he can count or recall, but he's never once been glad for what Mike went through because it meant having Mike, even for just a little bit. That's one thing he can say for himself. "Or maybe you figure something else out. Maybe it's just different."

"Maybe," Mike agrees, if not with the conviction Harvey would like to hear. "But maybe things really aren't simple, even when they feel that way."

Harvey almost wishes he could argue, except that Mike has found a way to rekindle his beliefs, and even if it's not the way Harvey would have chosen, it's not something he's going to take from Mike. Instead he asks, "Should I have taken you somewhere else?"

Mike laughs. "Guess that depends on what you wanted out of a vacation buddy."

"Mike."

"I've wanted to see it since I read the book," he tells Harvey.

"Was it worth the wait?"

"Every intervening year."

\*

"It actually *smells* like chocolate," Mike observes, looking a little gobsmacked, when he and Harvey pull into the B&B they're staying at in Hershey and step out of the car. Then he grins. "That is *awesome*."

Harvey can smell it too, it's impossible not to. It's not the kind of chocolate he eats anymore, too watered down with sugar and milk and additives, but it has the smell of cheap and familiar comfort from when he was a kid and his college days. He almost wishes Jessica were here, if only to have a few moments of the two of them just being friends, no messy hierarchies in between them. The desire dies out when Mike asks, "You think they have those ten pound bars here? I always wanted one of those when I was a kid. Gram said it weighed as much as I did and questioned what the hell I'd've done with it, but I bet you I could've finished one off."

Harvey makes a mental note to find a ten pound bar, if not a larger one, for Mike before they leave. Then he asks, "Wanna stay out here and get high on chocolate fumes while I check us in?"

The day is crisp, but nowhere near frigid and Harvey knows Mike prefers being outside when possible. Also, it does smell really good. Mike shakes his head. "Nah, this is only my second B&B ever."

His first was Gettysburg, something Harvey should have realized but hadn't even thought about. Mike charmed the *fuck* out of the mother-daughter team running that one. Harvey does fine on his own with the charm and all, but having Mike at his side invariably results in specials showing up on the breakfast menu that are evidently the house's super-duper special. Mike's kind of like a good luck charm that way. As such, Harvey doesn't argue, just picks up the bags and goes in the front door.

By the time he's got them checked in, Mike has amassed no less than fourteen pamphlets and information slips. Harvey can't stop himself from pointing out, "It's not that big a town."

"I wanna show Gram," Mike tells him, rolling his eyes. "I don't need them to remember."

Harvey makes sure the pamphlets get packed somewhere that will keep them crisp and away from liquids. They drop their bags in the room and Harvey spends the rest of the day at ease with Mike taking the lead, dragging them from place to place.

There's only a five pound commercially available, as it turns out, so Harvey buys four, mostly to hear Mike come up with ridiculous ideas for what he will do with all that chocolate. He also makes Mike take a picture and has it affixed to several different Hershey's products as the label for Vivian. Mike hugs him for the latter—and maybe, secretly, for the former—coming up alongside him in the checkout line and launching a sneak attack from the side.

It catches Harvey off guard for a moment, the unfettered contact aspect of it. Then he just frees his arm so that he can wrap it around Mike and uses the other hand to pay, silently daring the clerk to say one damn thing. The clerk asks, "Do you need gift wrapping for any of this?" and Harvey magnanimously decides he can live to see another day.

Despite the—honestly, heroic—amount of chocolate Mike consumes during the day, he sleeps hard that night, curled tightly into himself, his features soft and relaxed, no whimpers to be heard. Harvey lies awake in the next bed over, pretending he's not listening to Mike breathe, pretending he's not thinking about how very near he is to having no proper claim to Mike at all, pretending he couldn't care less that he will

have to learn to live alone again, soon.

\*

Harvey checks his bank accounts by rote every Monday morning, a habit his accountant drummed into him in their first year of acquaintance, after Harvey took the job with the D.A. Lately he's been putting it off, allowing it to happen later and later in the morning in a way that he hasn't in years.

When he opens the account dedicated to Mike one morning to see the balance has reached the contractual amount—the final transfer having come through three days earlier—he stares at the screen for a few minutes and then closes out of it. It takes some time, Harvey's not sure how much, to get his legs to stand, walk to the room where Mike is probably still dressing.

Harvey knocks on the door. Mike calls, "Just a second!"

It's literally that, too, before Mike's opening the door, hair still a mess from the shower, shirt untucked, a complete mess. Harvey says, "Good morning."

"So good it couldn't wait until I'd joined you for coffee?" Mike starts to walk back into the room, leaving space for Harvey to follow him. Harvey doesn't.

"Come back here for a second."

Mike looks at him then, pausing. "Harvey?"

"Just come here, kid," Harvey says, and it's almost funny, because he's usually so consciencious about not telling Mike what to do, even on the little things.

Mike approaches, his face carefully blank. Harvey reaches out to take the wrist Mike wears his ID bracelet on, and says, "I'm just going to take this off, okay? You don't need it anymore."

Mike doesn't say anything, but he tears his wrist away, tucking it to his chest. Harvey's about to tell him that it's okay, he can wear it if he chooses, that's up to him, when Mike speaks up. "Oh fuck."

Harvey has seen Mike scream out in his sleep, has seen him shake and twist and come apart with fear right in front of Harvey's eyes. He has never seen him simply stop breathing. It takes Harvey a second to realize what is happening, and even then, it's more Mike's hands going to his chest than anything that clues Harvey in.

Luckily, Harvey actually has seen a panic attack before. They had happened once or twice in the Harvard library, usually near finals. Harvey tugs at Mike and leads both of them to Mike's bed, to get Mike sitting down so he can't fall. Then Harvey guides Mike's head between his legs and slips his hand under the hem of Mike's shirt in order to stroke at his back. He murmurs, "It's okay, Mike, you're okay, nothing's changed, you're fine," until Mike graduates from broken wheezing to a sort of shaky pattern of in, out, in, out.

Eventually Mike manages to raise his head, only to resituate himself into collapsing onto his side on the bed. Harvey lies down so that

they're facing, keeping his hand on Mike's back, since it seems to help. Mike's eyes are closed, but he says, "So, I have some anxiety about things, right now."

Harvey knows Mike is trying to get him to laugh, but he's no more in the mood to do so than Mike is. Instead he says, "You're going through a lot of transition right now."

Mike's lips quirk. "Dr. Teng give you that line?"

Yes. "She spoke to me regarding awareness of some possible situations and reactions."

"Yes, then."

There are times when Harvey kind of wishes Mike wasn't a genius. Harvey keeps his tone neutral. "This was a normal reaction."

Mike's breathing is still a little loud, off kilter. "You'd think that'd make me feel better about wanting to keep a symbol of slavery on myself for everyone to see and being scared to do anything on my own despite having made the damn decision to do so. And yet, strangely, it does not."

Harvey curls the hand that is lightly making its way along Mike's back slightly, to allow the knuckles to sweep over tightened muscles. "I shouldn't have gone about it like that. If I'd just told you, you could have processed, and then made any decisions about the other stuff. It was just too much at once."

Mike opens his eyes. Harvey can see the exhaustion from too little sleep and the after-effects of the panic attack swimming in them. Mike argues, "Really not."

"I bet you Dr. Teng could settle this disagreement."

Mike makes a face. "Unfair, she always agrees with you."

Harvey makes a face right back. "Only when I'm pointing out that you're expecting too much of yourself."

"Which is pretty much always." Mike ends the sentence on a yawn.

"Get some rest," Harvey says softly.

"Work," Mike says, but his heart's not in it and he's drifted off by the time Harvey can start to reassure him.

\*

Hui comes over a couple of nights later to help Mike start packing. She's one of the most organized people Harvey's ever met—up to and including Donna—and she lived in China for the first eleven years of her life, plus the year she did a fellowship in traditional medicine there after med school. She makes lists with Mike's help, keeping them short and succinct and not overwhelming.

In the morning, Harvey finds her on the couch. He takes her a cup of coffee and wakes her with a touch to her hand. She accepts the cup with an appreciative smile. "Morning."



"You need a ride somewhere?"

She shakes her head. "I biked, I'm good."

"How's he holding up?" Harvey has always hated others knowing more than he does, but he swallows his pride because it's not as if he's got all the time in the world to be a good friend to Mike.

She rubs a hand over the back of her neck. "Not sure, honestly. He's been more ready to try things this week, but in a kind of aggressive way, like he's pushing himself, like he's afraid if he doesn't make himself he won't...I don't know, leave? Take other opportunities? Sometimes I think maybe I should stop him, but it's not as if I don't *want* it and it seems, uh, overly paternal, I suppose, to assume what I think is good for him is better than what he thinks."

Harvey knows the feeling all too well. "I suppose it could be worse."

"Mm," Hui agrees. "Listen, I was thinking we should throw him a goodbye party. Nothing big, just, you know, you, me, Jun, Donna, anyone else you think would be a good idea. Burgers and pizza, stuff he can't get over there, maybe a few presents that'll help him with the homesickness."

The thought has crossed Harvey's mind. Mike has gone out with Hui, Jun and friends almost weekly for the better part of a year and a half, so it's not as though a social gathering would be too much for him, particularly if it were on familiar ground, such as the condo or the firm. "Couple of days before so we could get the presents packed?"

"I'll email Donna my schedule and work out the details with her."

"On me."

"Harvey—"

"Half and half," he backs down, because she's Mike's girlfriend and it's her right, perhaps even more than his, but he's not giving any further.

"Deal," she says, and sticks out her hand.

"Are you guys plotting world domination?" Mike asks sleepily, still blinking and stumbling toward the couch. He reaches it and curls into Hui, who shifts so that he fits nicely. Harvey wonders when she left the bed, if it was her choice or Mike's or something mutual. They seem so easy together, but Harvey knows that's so very small a part of their story. He wishes it were him, but at the same time, he aches for her, having to tread so carefully, to negotiate the twin rivers of someone else's desires and fears.

"For certain definitions of the word 'world'," she tells Mike, ruffling his hair.

"Is there enough coffee left for me?" He sniffs at the air plaintively. Hui rolls her eyes, but she shares her cup.

Harvey gives her a look that says, "sucker." She responds with one of her own that says, "I know what he does to *you*, Specter." And well, fair enough. Harvey leaves them to wake each other up.

Donna plans the party to take place at Harvey's because, "It'll be easier to set up the surprise that way."

Harvey plays that sentence back in his head a few times and then asks, "It's a surprise party?"

"Don't leave party planning to someone else if you want control over the details," she advises him.

It's a valid point. "Okay, so, I'm guessing I'm in charge of getting him there?"

Donna gives him the play-by-play and a very sweet, more-than-mildly threatening, "Do *not* fuck my planning efforts up, Specter."

Harvey wouldn't dare. He does, however, have Hui schedule a date with Mike that night so that she can cancel it last minute. Nothing makes a surprise party better like a big dose of disappointment right beforehand. When he explains this to Hui, she says, "You're a sadist."

"You're not making much noise about going along."

"I'm a doctor. Everyone *knows* we're sadists."

"Lawyer."

There's silence for a second. "That's really much kinder than most people would be."

Harvey snickers and hangs up. And on the night of the party, when Hui cancels less than thirty minutes before the supposed date—which, ow—Harvey asks Mike, "You okay?"

Mike shrugs. "Hui got called into surgery. I get it, but, I mean, I leave in two days."

It's the first time Mike has talked aloud about the fact that he's about to get on a plane and go spend some time on the other side of world. He's alluded, and packed and done everything else, but not just said the words so that he and others could hear them. They hit Harvey harder than he's expecting, if not harder than he *should* have expected and it takes him a few seconds to say, "Let's call it an early night."

"Who are you, and what have you done with Harvey Specter?"

"That the best you can do? Really?"

Mike smiles half-heartedly. "What would we do with our early night?"

"Round of ball, clean up, your favorite take-out, then we could watch a movie or I could kick your ass at chess—"

"I won last time!"

"I let you," Harvey tells him, not missing a beat, "or we could sleep, whatever."

"I'm only taking you up on this offer because I don't have a better

one."

Harvey grins. "Trust me, I know the feeling."

He goes easy on Mike on the court, which should tip Mike off, but if it does Mike probably thinks it's because Harvey feels sorry for him. They clean up at the office and then Ray comes to get them. Ray stays in the car as they go up, despite the fact that he's invited and will come on up as soon as Harvey gives him the go-ahead. It would look a little odd for him to suddenly follow them up to Harvey's place on a random night.

Harvey texts ahead to Hui, and by the time the elevator stops his place is perfectly dark and still, at least until they step out and Harvey flips on the lights. Then there's a well-coordinated, if not particularly loud, shout of "surprise." Harvey's glad for the decibel regulation, since Mike's easy to rattle, even if he's better about hiding it.

Mike blinks at the others and then at Harvey. He catches sight of Hui and says, "Wow, mean," but with a smile, and then she's coming forward, the others following, to draw Mike into the apartment. Harvey wanders to his kitchen to grab a beer and finds Jessica there, drinking a glass of wine. He opens his bottle of choice and taps it to her glass. "Glad you came."

"Thought there might be more than one person tonight who needed a few friendly faces."

Harvey inclines his head a bit. All he says, though, is, "He'll be good for the new office."

"I know," she says softly.

He can see into the living area, where Mike is digging into the pizza, Hui's hand on his knee, laughing at something Jun is saying. Vivian, whom Donna sweet-talked the home staff into letting out for a bit, is on his other side, beaming at the tableau of him and Hui. Donna and Ray are off the side a bit, probably flirting, if Harvey knows them. There are a few other associates in attendance, ones Jun decided were worthwhile and introduced Mike to a while back. A couple of the friends in Hui and Jun's group have also come. All in all, it's quite a turn out for a kid who didn't have anyone a little over two years ago, when Harvey put his job and reputation on the line to take him home. Harvey doesn't regret it. He doesn't think he would even if it had cost him his job and reputation.

Jessica puts her hand to the small of his back, startling him out of the reverie. She says, "Let's go join them, before they advance to cake without us."

"Well played," he tells her, and follows her advice.

\*

Hui and Harvey drop Mike off at JFK at seven o'clock on a Friday morning. Harvey gives the two of them some time to say goodbye privately before wandering back, standing awkwardly in front of Mike. He's double-checked Mike's bags at least four times, made sure he has all the information he needs memorized—which, of course he does—done everything that Donna would do to him with not half as much subtlety. Mike has been kind enough not to mention it.

Now, though, Mike is fidgeting too. Harvey's tempted to tell him to just get on the damn plane, tempted to avoid all of this, to go back to his life the way it was before Mike and never look back. Only, Mike whispers, "I'm scared."

Harvey nods. "Wouldn't make sense for you not to be."

"You wouldn't be," Mike says with a confidence Harvey does not feel.

"Apples and oranges."

Mike wraps his arms around his chest and sways inward toward Harvey, but doesn't actually move that direction. "You're gonna take care of Gram, right?"

"After the first few Skype sessions with me there just to help, you can ask her and get all the horrible details about my sub-Michael qualities of concern yourself."

Mike quirks a smile, but it's forced. Harvey's own feels a little painful. "Kid—"

Mike moves toward him, then, releasing the latch on the bracelet. "Can you keep this?"

He's putting it in Harvey's hand before Harvey can refuse, closing Harvey's fingers over it. Mike says, "Just...your memory isn't as good as mine."

Harvey tightens his fingers over the bracelet, letting the patterns of the metal sink into his skin. "I'm not going to forget you."

Mike shrugs. "Call it insurance."

Harvey hesitates, because they're in an airport, and Hui's standing off to the side, and because he's just simply not used to being this kind of guy, but he pulls Mike to him, and holds tight. "Call me when you get in. The phone is on the firm's dime, we can talk as long as we want."

"Okay."

"You're going to be fine. There's all kinds of movies for the way there, you've got work in your carry-on if you're feeling productive, and the flight attendants know to take extra special care."

"You *bribed* the flight staff?" Mike asks, mostly muffled against Harvey's shoulder, but Harvey can hear him.

"I might have had some persuasive conversations with a few of them." Not involving money, but Harvey doesn't really feel like mentioning that.

"You're incorrigible."

"And you're back to using your SAT words, so everything is going to be fine."

"Aw, c'mon, that was at least GRE worthy."

Harvey cuffs the back of Mike's head while still holding on and then,

before it gets to the point where he can't, he lets go. He shoves Mike lightly in the direction of the boarding line and goes to stand next to Hui. They stand there until well after Mike has made his way through the security line, when Hui asks, "Wanna go have some breakfast with our bloody marys?"

Harvey places the bracelet in his left inner-vest pocket, where it settles, warm from the skin of his palm, over the beat of his heart. "Excellent plan."

\*

Harvey doesn't sleep that night. He tells himself it's because he's waiting to hear that Mike is there safely, but Harvey monitored the plane as it made its way there: unless Mike managed to fall out, he's fine. Besides, when the gchat comes through with a self-taken picture of Mike standing in Beijing's airport, rumpled and baggy-eyed and a little grey but with a look of "holy shit, look!" on his face, Harvey does not fall into bed and sleep it off. Rather, he chats back, "Is the firm contact there?"

Mike's, "What are you doing awake?" is almost immediate, with a follow up, "Yes. His English is way better than my Chinese."

"Your Chinese is less than a year along with no immersion education to help out. Give yourself a couple of weeks."

Harvey has at least managed to get himself *into* bed by the time Mike replies with the non-sequitur, "There are so many people here. Way more than New York."

Harvey remembers his first trip across the world. It had been to Japan, not China, but he feels relatively certain that the feeling of displacement, of difference and *smallness* is probably the same. He can't imagine being Mike, still building up faith in his own personhood while handling that sensation. "You'll get used to it."

"I'm tired," Mike sends. Harvey wishes he could hear Mike's voice, know if he means it in a purely physical sense, or if, like Harvey, it's something much worse, much harder to combat.

"Don't sleep until night your time. Trust me, it'll only make the jetlag worse."

"I know. I mean, I've read."

Silence between them hasn't been a problem in so long that it takes Harvey a second to realize he's not as comfortable with it when he's not sure Mike's still on the "other end of the line" so to speak. Awkwardly, he tries, "Flight okay?"

"There are a lot of truly horrible movies in this universe. And they all end up as options on an international flight."

Harvey laughs softly. "Did you eat?"

"Yes, mom. Did you?"

"Point taken." He appreciates that Mike hasn't mentioned how Harvey really should be asleep at this time of night/morning, and knows the

value of stopping while he's ahead. Still unsure of what to say to this Mike who's not right next to him, who can't read Harvey's intentions in his body language or the pattern of his breathing, Harvey defaults to, "Try and enjoy yourself, yeah?"

"I kind of wish you'd come. Just to help me settle."

They'd talked about it. And they'd both agreed it was for the best that Harvey not do that, that Mike have a clean start in a place with no obvious markings of the past for him. Still, Harvey wishes he felt so sure they were right about that. In the morning Jessica will reassure him. Mike doesn't have anyone there to do that for him. "Better this way."

"I keep telling myself that. Aloud. People are starting to look at me funny."

"That's your face," Harvey reassures him.

"You're one to talk."

Harvey grins. He wonders if Mike knows it's happening, the same way he knows Mike's shoulders have lowered just a tiny bit. He hopes so. He does not, like some teenage girl, type it into the chat box. He does say, "My phone's on. It'll alert me if you chat me."

"Thanks. Get some rest."

Harvey tries; he really, really does.

\*

Two weeks after Mike has left, Jessica steals Harvey's phone. Well, technically Donna is the one who picks his pocket—literally, and not that he doesn't have a healthy respect for Donna's abilities, but that one seems a little over-the-top even for her—but Donna hands the goods over to Jessica, so he considers Jessica to be more than slightly complicit in the whole scheme. Of course, she also readily admits to that fact, so it's not as satisfying a belief as it would otherwise be.

Harvey is looking for the damn thing when she walks in, waves it at him and asks, "Looking for something?"

Harvey *knows* he didn't accidentally leave his phone in Jessica's office, so he fixes her with a sufficiently suspicious look. Irritatingly, but not unpredictably, she smiles. "Finder's keepers."

"Technically—"

"Do not quote property law at me, Harvey Prince Specter."

Evidently there will be no fighting fair today, since Jessica damn well knows how much he abhors his middle name. "What shall I do instead, pray tell, Jessica Genet Pearson?"

Harvey bites back a sigh. As retorts go, it's weak. For one thing, Jessica's middle name was her grandmother's before her, the grandmother Jessica swears she learned everything from. For another, it lacks creativity.

Surprisingly, Jessica lets all of that go, though, instead actually responding to his question. "Come to my place in Scottsdale with me for the weekend. I've got spring training passes."

The thought of getting out of the last dregs of the New York winter, silently assessing the new talent and sizing up the returning players tempts Harvey enormously, but, "Jessica, we've got the—"

"Mr. Qian is running point for all your cases over the weekend, with Kayden providing senior associate support should there be any need. And it isn't as if he can't get hold of you in an emergency."

"Actually, as you have my phone—"

"Donna forwarded anything from Mike through to her phone and anything from anyone else to mine. I'd worry about getting booty called, except empirical evidence points to the fact that you haven't left this office in a fortnight."

"Fortnight, rea—" Harvey starts.

She cuts him off. "Just checking to make sure you were paying attention. If your associate needs anything, he'll get me and I'll connect him to you. In the meantime, you and I are going to put on some shorts, drink a few beers, watch some baseball and pretend like we're old friends for a couple of days."

Harvey looks at her for a few moments, wishing he didn't feel quite so much like he has failed a test she created precisely for him; wishing even moreso that she didn't seem so entirely forgiving of his failure in this instance. "What time's our flight?"

"Two hours."

"Jessi—"

"It's okay. Donna packed for you."

\*

The first twenty-four hours of not being able to check his phone and make sure Mike doesn't need anything, even if it's just someone to talk to, are actually worse than Harvey remembers it being when he gave up smoking his junior year of high school. Harvey hopes, for his sake, that's just the passage of time talking. After that, though, Jessica's theory pans out, and he starts to unwind for the first time since Jessica told him about the China office.

Jessica's Scottsdale place is a show house, mostly, largely used to allow clients use of it or business associates. But for the few times when she's able to have use of it herself, it definitely has its perks. The pool and hot tub combo in the back are Harvey's favorite. The gym at his condo is all well and good, but there's something about waking at dawn and taking the few steps outside, where the air is dry and working its way toward warm. The pool has a waterfall feature that Harvey likes to float underneath when he's finished making lazy laps back and forth.

On the second morning, Jessica joins him, slipping outside with two mugs of coffee and sliding into the water alongside him. "I was considering booking us massages at the clubhouse spa."

Harvey takes a sip of the coffee. "You won't get a no from me."

She smiles. "So. Talk about him. How's he doing?"

"Really sure you wanna have that conversation?"

"Do I do things I don't want to do?" she asks lightly.

"Yes," he tells her, absolutely no hesitation.

She modifies the question. "When it comes to you?"

It takes Harvey a second longer to answer, "Still a yes, but the instances are more limited."

"Harvey," she says, the smirk now in her tone as well as on her face. "For all your skill at deflecting—"

"You're still taller than me. I know." He does, too. For all the times he's thought her to be wrong, he's never thought that was because he saw her as being less smart or intuitive or aware than he is. "What is it you want to hear?"

She shrugs. "How bad's the homesickness?"

Harvey runs a hand along the surface of the water. "Worse when I Skype from Vivian's. Then he always looks like someone took him out back with the express purpose of kicking him to death. Okay the rest of the time. He's still pretty excited every time he goes out on his own and spends an afternoon working in a tea shop or a park or anywhere, really. He finds everything interesting."

"How often have you been going to see Vivian?"

Harvey closes his eyes, tipping his face up toward the sun. "At least three times a week. I try to make it more. She worries. Sometimes I think she knows exactly what Mike did and just doesn't want to take anything from him by saying as much. She knows he's fine, she can see and talk to him, but-- I don't begrudge her any dis-ease she feels."

"And yet you begrudge yourself that same lack of ease. Despite the fact that you spent nearly two years sewing the pieces of him back together with your bare hands."

"The whole point of that endeavor was, *is* that he's not mine. He doesn't belong to anyone but Mike. Vivian maybe a bit, because grandmothers have special privileges, but not me or Hui or the firm or anyone else."

"Except that you do belong to me, just a little." Her words are careful but unflinching. "No more or less than I belong to you."

Harvey rolls that over in his mind, canting his head to the side and opening his eyes to watch her. She's stretched out over the water, her head resting on the side of the pool, feet kicking idly at the water. Intellectually, Harvey knows she's gorgeous. Emotionally, though, she's just Jessica, too long something bigger and more important for that to matter. He suspects that is the difference in his comfort level of admitting ownership, that and the fact that legal papers existed between him and Mike for quite some time. Unsure of how to answer,



he tells her, "He has a list of things he wants to do while he's there. It has one hundred and twenty-two items on it. He actually wrote them out just so he can cross them off."

"Sounds familiar," she says, her mouth twisting into a wry smile.

Harvey smiles in response, remembering the lists he used to have—never written down, but no less well kept for that—of things he wanted to do, places he wanted to go. "The nightmares are back. I think he sleeps at the office a lot."

"It'll get easier."

"I told him that. So did Hui."

She waits a minute before adding, "For you, too."

After a long moment, Harvey nods. "I know. The problem, I think, is that I suspect I don't want what I wanted before him."

She does not seem surprised. "Figure out what it is you want, then."

"How?" Harvey asks her, tone flat but intent sincere. "All I ever wanted when I was a kid was out. And then I got out and I had what I wanted. I don't remember how to do this."

"I don't think you can do it the same way you did back then anyway. You're a smart boy, Harvey. Use it for something else besides fixing other people's problems."

Harvey dips under the water, allowing it to cool him for a moment and then returns to the surface. "You make it sound so effortless."

"My mistake. It's infinitely more complicated than any other task available, but also, the one you need face most."

Harvey nods in acceptance without looking at her. She asks, "Of the hundred twenty-two things, are any of them still on *your* list?"

Her knowledge of him should be discomfiting, but it just makes him feel safe. "A few."

Her smile is familiar, aware without being threatening. "When you figure out what you want, maybe you should go cross them off the list with him."

"How am I supposed to know when that is?"

"If nothing else, Donna will tell you."

He laughs then, and it hurts, but it's the good, muscle-ache kind of pain, the sort that means he might get something out of it.

\*

The day of his birthday, Harvey wakes up, dresses, grabs some coffee on the way to work and starts his day. In other words, it is like any other day that week, or month, or year. At around nine, Mike pings him, "Happy birthday."

Harvey scowls at his phone. He considers the message for a few seconds and then buzzes Donna. "Donna."

"Harvey."

"Would you, by any chance, have given classified employee information to one Mike Ross?"

"Take the stick out, Harvey. I can't believe the kid lived with you for almost two years and you never told him when your damn birthday was. I'm pretty sure he was starting to think you were hatched."

Harvey cuts the connection. Jessica is allowed to wish him happy birthday because she is Jessica and there is no stopping her. The same goes for Donna. The same does *not* apply to Mike Ross. Except that evidently, now it does. Because the alternative is shutting it down and Harvey can just imagine the look on Mike's face. Not that he ever enjoys his birthday, or anything, but kicking the office's favorite golden retriever puppy isn't going to make the day any better.

He texts back a cursory, "Thanks."

Of course, Mike does not let it go at that. "OMG, Donna wasn't kidding when she said you hated birthdays, huh?"

Harvey prevaricates. He doesn't usually do this at the office, but fuck it, it's his birthday, he's allowed. He keys up the Skype on his computer and rings Mike. A second later, Mike's there, a shit-eating grin on his face and Harvey almost rescinds Mike's Harvey-birthday-wishes privileges. Only Harvey kind of likes the grin, which he thinks he should talk to the therapist he's started seeing about. "I don't hate birthdays. Have I ever seemed to have hated yours or Donna's or Jessica's?"

"So it's just yours?" Mike asks, the smile dimming slightly.

"I never really got used to them," Harvey says, as lightly as he can, hoping Mike will leave off, knowing he won't, somehow comforted by that knowledge. Harvey hates that his brain makes no sense where Mike is concerned.

"Your mom never remembered, huh?"

"She had more important things on her mind." Harvey actually isn't bitter. The thought brings more of a dull loneliness, a shadow of what might have been.

"No. She was just selfish." Mike says it with the nascent anger Harvey can no longer find and it's nice that someone can, especially for him. Harvey nods in acknowledgment.

Mike changes the topic. "You gonna go to Carnegie's?"

Mike is the only person in the world who knows—literally, including Donna and Jessica—that Harvey's favorite dessert ever and in perpetuity is a slice of plain cheesecake with blueberries on top from Carnegie's. It's hopelessly pedestrian and worse, touristy, but it's also delicious, which is Harvey's downfall. The idea of going alone and picking a piece up and eating it back at his place doesn't really suit, though, so he shakes his head. "Nah. Jessica'll probably drag me somewhere for dinner. It'll be nice."

"They deliver until two. You could pick someone up at that dinner, take her home and make her share."

Harvey blinks. "Are you seriously giving me advice on how to have a one-night stand on my birthday?"

Mike is undeterred. "Clearly you need it, you pathetic excuse for a birthday boy."

"Isn't it past your bedtime?"

Mike's grin is back. "Happy birthday!"

"Yeah, yeah."

\*

In spite of himself, Harvey picks up the hostess at Ai Fiori, where Jessica treats Donna and him to the seven course tasting menu. Neither of them mentions his birthday, and Donna even has the kindness to roll her eyes at his closing tactics. He kisses them both goodnight on the cheek and puts them safely in their respective vehicles with a murmured, "Thanks."

They let it go at, "You're welcome."

The hostess is five foot eight inches of athletic grace, a Ph.D. student in urban planning at Columbia, with a tattoo along her ribs that Harvey enjoys tracing with his tongue. Her name's Cat, short for Catullus, and when Harvey asks, "Was that a come on?" mildly confused, given that he's already taken her home, she laughs, "My mom's a poetry professor in Rhode Island."

It makes perfect sense. He orders the cheesecake around one and she eats it with him. She's clever and sexy and laid-back and Harvey wishes it were Mike, with all his insecurities and uncertainties and rawness.

He offers for her to stay, but she declines with a simple, "Class in the morning. My place is closer."

Next to the door, taunting him, is the package that had been waiting for him when he'd gotten home. He'd pushed it aside, concentrating on Cat's presence, not wanting to open it in front of anyone, not with it displaying a clear post-mark from China.

He sits in front of it now, considering. If Mike were there, he'd shove at Harvey, say, "Open it already." Mike's not there.

Finally, Harvey decides sitting in his condo, staring at a package like it's going to speak up and tell him something is stupid. He grabs a knife from the kitchen and opens the top of the crate. It takes a while to jimmy what's inside out and then unwrap it from the multiple layers of padding, but when he does, he's left staring at a **leopard, running through the snow**. The piece is gorgeous, but not at all Harvey, which is weird, because Mike is actually pretty good at determining what Harvey is going to be into.

There's a card tucked into the corner of the frame. Harvey plucks it out and reads the note folded inside.

Harvey:

*I'm never going to say this to you aloud, I don't think I could. I know this isn't really your sort of decor, but I couldn't stop myself. I went to Suzhou a couple of weeks ago, this type of art is an ancient skill there, one that, so far as I know, isn't practiced anywhere else. The painting you're looking at is not a painting. It is an embroidery, millions of tiny stitches coming together to create a whole.*

*The leopard itself is you, stark and strong and fierce and impervious to the conditions outside you. The method, though, that's me. A million scattered little pieces, brought together. That couldn't have happened without you.*

*You can put it in the room I was in, if you want, or regift it, or whatever. It just felt right.*

*Happy birthday, Mike*

When he can feel his fingers, when he can do *anything* again, Harvey finds his phone and chats Mike, "It's going in my office. I'll see it more that way."

He knows Mike's at work, so he's not really expecting an immediate reply, but he gets one. "You don't have to, you know."

"Believe me when I say I'm perfectly aware of what I have or do not have to do at all times."

"I mostly believe you."

"Mostly."

But Mike just responds, "Go to bed, old man."

Harvey will get him back for that later. Right now, that sounds like good advice.

\*

Jun is the first person to walk into Harvey's office after the embroidery piece has been mounted. He takes one look at it and says, "I think your expensive tastes have rubbed off on Mike."

Harvey has no idea if that is actually true, or if Mike was just trying to live up to Harvey's expensive standards, but either way, he's just glad Mike is making the kind of money where he can do as he pleases. He does his best to look casually pleased and unimpressed all at once and says, "Good."

Jun laughs, and sits down to discuss litigation strategy in a case that's actually going to see the inside of a courtroom. Harvey listens with half an ear, appreciative of the way Jun thinks outside of the box, even if there are several points he's missing, things Harvey will have to rework. It's a start, though, a good one.

Harvey points out that they're missing precedence on a procedural issue he absolutely will not have getting in the way of the substantive ones—especially since it would weigh for the other side—and sends Jun off to research like a good associate.

Then he gives Donna the Look, and she comes and sits down in front of his desk. "Yes?"

"You still go to lesbian bars?"

For a second she looks unusually blindsided by this turn in the conversation, but then says, "Sometimes, when I'm looking for something in that genre."

"Know any places where the offerings are a little more male and a lot more discreet?"

"You know Jessica's well aware you slept with like a third of your Harvard class, seventy-eight percent of which was male, right?"

"She also sent me to Cameron partly as a way to give me time to grow up and learn to, if not keep it in my pants, then keep it behind closed doors. Call it a courtesy."

Donna smirks. "Pomegranate. It's in Hell's Kitchen, but it's what you want. Just, a word of caution, it's a martini bar."

Harvey winces. "Of course it is."

"This is a one-time offer, and due only to the fact that in spite of myself I am genuinely concerned about the struggles contact with a real human being who engaged your cyborg heart has had on your emotional retardation, but do you need a co-pilot?"

"Wow," Harvey deadpans. "However could I turn down such an offer?"

"Take it or leave it, Specter. You have ten seconds. Ten, nine—"

"Thanks."

Donna holds his gaze for a couple of seconds and then nods. "You're welcome. Now, if you're done with your teenage angst, would it be all right for me to get back to running this place?"

\*

The man Harvey takes back to his place is a gorgeous confection of honey brown hair and sky-bright blue eyes, and so, so sweet. Harvey feels itchy in his own damn skin until he's put the guy safely in a cab and sent him home as the sun is coming up.

He grabs the keys to the '73 Barracuda that he rebuilt piece-by-piece in the early days after leaving Cameron's grip for just such occasions, times when he needs to go at his own speed, in his own direction. He gets himself out of the city, to places he never took Mike, places he can't say for certain Mike has ever seen, in the hopes of being alone in his own head.

Leaves are changing this far out of the city and Harvey can remember the first time he ever saw this stretch of road. He drives until the exhaustion that's been riding him since Mike stepped on that plane catches up and there's nothing to do but to pull into a rest stop. He sits on a table, the rustle of fall around him, his feet firm on the wooden planks of the bench.

His phone rests beside him, a concession to the outside world. He stares at it for a long time, wondering if Donna will sound unsurprised if he calls, if Jessica will say the one thing that will make him come back, if Hui will tell him to bring wine to her potluck that evening, if Mike will want to see where he's at, ask what the car feels like beneath him. In the end, he realizes he doesn't want to know. There's only one voice he wants to hear, and he has no idea what the voice will say, which may or may not be the draw.

Harvey suspects it's more about his need to be decently uncomplicated for one person at this moment, even if it can't be himself. He hits memory five and waits.

His brother picks up on the second ring and asks, "Everything okay?"

Harvey winces. He deserves that. He's good at keeping tabs from a distance, good at sending cards and gifts on all the right occasions. He's crap at calling just to say hi. "Hey, Donny. Yeah, everything's fine."

Donovan laughs at him. "You know you're the only person in the world that gets away with calling me that, right?"

"Being an older brother to your pain in the ass had to be good for something."

Donovan snorts softly. Harvey hears what he imagines is the sound of Donovan slipping out of bed. He asks, "I wake Colette?"

"She'll forgive you. I'm pretty sure my wife likes you better."

Harvey's pretty sure his sister-in-law thinks he eats babies in his free time, but he appreciates Donovan lying to him. "How's San Diego?"

"Sunny. And you never ask that kind of shit, so why don't we cut to the chase?"

Harvey's not entirely sure where the chase *is*, but he figures he's woken Donovan—who works as much, if not more, than Harvey—up on a Saturday morning, so he might as well start somewhere. "When we were kids, you kinda... There was some hero worship happening, right?"

"You're my big brother, Harvey. And you're good at it, for the most part. Of course there was. There still is."

The way Donovan says it, like it's nothing, like Harvey would never choose to injure him with that knowledge hurts Harvey's chest. "But you still, I mean, you realized I was kind of a jerk, right? And emotionally damaged and—"

"Does this have something to do with your mysteriously acquired roommate who moved to China and whom Donna quite stridently refuses to discuss in that charming way she has of thinking she has completely deflected my curiosity?"

Harvey blinks. "What?"

"You may be the worst communicator in the known world, Harv, but aside from the fact that I'm a leading consulting behavioral psychologist and I actually know you, it's the stuff you talk about least that I generally have to worry about the most. And if *Donna's* not talking

about it? I was half expecting to find out you had cancer or a love-child from high school you never mentioned or, honestly, I don't even know."

"He was an Indebted," Harvey admits, closing his eyes, waiting to be judged, hoping to be given a chance.

After a second, Donovan says, "Huh. Hadn't come up with that possibility." Then, "I take it from your use of the past-tense that his status has changed?"

"We made it possible for him to buy his contract."

"Okay," Donovan's response is soft. "So what's got you twisted up?"

"I think-- I think it's possible I'm emotionally attached to him."

There's a long silence, long enough Harvey almost makes sure the phone hasn't dropped the call when he recognizes the strained sound coming from the other end of the line. "Are you *laughing* at me?"

And then Donovan gives up on being subtle and he's *guffawing*. Harvey looks at his phone as though it is what has betrayed him. "You are an asshole."

"I'm sorry," Donovan says, sounding less than entirely apologetic. "Just, it's called falling in love, Harvey."

"I didn't say that."

"Trust me, I'm aware."

"Donny. He-- When I-- When he came to live with me, he was *broken*."

Donovan stops laughing. "Okay, Harv. Okay. But that's not when you fell in love."

"How do you even know that?"

"Because of the way you say 'broken.' Because you would have called me then. Because I know you. Pick your poison."

Harvey couldn't say what it is exactly, whether it's that he believes Donovan, or that Donovan believes *in* him, but either way, for the first time in a long time, he feels as though he can breathe without forcing it, without reminding himself how that works. "What do I do? He has a girlfriend. I *like* his girlfriend."

"Isn't this what you do for a living? Figure out a way for everyone to win?"

"No. I figure out a way for me— my client to win."

"Oh, so that's how negotiation works?"

"Actually—"

"Don't play stupid. It doesn't suit you."

"I take your point."

"But?"

"That's the job. It's easy."

"No, you're just braver when you get the chance to hide behind your job. But you're not a coward otherwise, just...not as clear on who you are."

Uncharacteristically, Harvey finds himself admitting. "I wish you were here."

"We'd love to come for Thanksgiving, if you—"

Harvey frowns. "You don't need an invitation."

"I can read between the lines, Harvey. I can't read your mind."

Harvey rubs his face. "I've been distracted. For almost two years."

Donovan's laughter is understanding this time. "Had to happen sooner or later."

"You seem so sure."

"Maybe that's the hero worship. I've always know there was more to you than you wanted anyone to see, even yourself."

"And what if he-- What if I were to make it so that everyone wins only to find out that what he has for me is nothing more than that, the gratitude of someone who needed me for so long? The blindness of someone who attached in a moment of weakness?"

"You really believe that of the guy you've fallen in love with after a lifetime of not even really noticing anyone else to any significant extent?"

Put like that, "I should probably stop being a condescending, underestimating prick."

"Old habits are hard to break."

"Careful. I can still beat you up."

"Oh, I don't doubt it, but my wife would leave your body parts for the crows, so I feel pretty insulated from your wrath."

All indications aside, Harvey knows when to admit defeat.

\*

Harvey finds out about Mike and Hui's break up two weeks after it happens. This is less shocking than the fact that he finds out from Hui. He's spoken to Mike nearly every day. And sure, Mike has seemed a little pensive lately, a tad more quiet than on average, but nothing near depressed or melancholy, just as though he's been taking his time with things.

Harvey stops by the hospital on one of Hui's thirty-six hour shifts because he knows from both Jun and Mike that she forgets to eat sometimes during those stretches. He's in the neighborhood due to a



meeting and needs to grab food anyway. He hasn't seen her in a while, all in all, it seems like a good plan.

He realizes something's up when she looks surprised to see him in a way that isn't related to the fact that they usually schedule their meet ups. She finagles for a break and they colonize a table in the doctor's lounge. She tears into the dak galbi he's brought her from the Korean place a few blocks down, looking up apologetically. "Sorry, forgot breakfast."

He waves a hand, starting in on his own kimchi bokkeumbap somewhat more delicately. He chokes on his last bite when she asks, "Mike didn't mention our break-up?"

He recovers with admirable grace, but she's definitely caught on and says, "Sorry, I didn't mean-- I would have thought he would have."

That makes two of them, really. "Hui—"

"It was mutual. Very mutual. So you don't have to kill me, or threaten to, or anything."

Harvey's still trying to find a reasonable reaction to all of this, when Hui laughs, small and sad, but amused underneath all of that. "Jun's so damned protective of both of us, he's been going crazy this whole time, worried we were using each other, unsure of what the hell to do. And it's, I mean, we were? Using each other. But we were both honest about that, too. That's why we were able to, y'know, admit to each other it was time to move on."

"He wasn't using you."

She looks at Harvey, her expression unfooled and unbothered. "He needed someone safe, Harvey. Of course he was using me, a little. But I needed someone safe, too. And he knew that."

"He never—"

"No, he's very discreet. Jun, too. Neither of them would ever..." Hui runs a hand over the back of her neck. "Years ago, in college, I was in a serious relationship. He was older than me, a grad student. Leading scholar, respected collegiate tennis player, Chinese-American, perfect."

"Except for the part where he beat you," Harvey says softly, filling in the blanks.

She sighs. "Beating was nice, sure, but rape was his favorite. More control, more *power*, fewer marks, if you do it right, and all."

Harvey keeps his gaze on her, doing his best to make sure it is compassionate, but not pitying. She doesn't need the latter. She takes a breath. "I got back later than I was supposed to one night. I'd been with a study group, we'd run over. He lost it. He'd been on about me cheating for months by that point, but that night he just snapped. Somewhere in the beating he broke my collarbone. After he tied me to the bed I kind of...went somewhere. I don't actually remember much of it.

"I woke up the next morning and he was gone and I wasn't tied anymore. I called Jun. He was a senior in high school. He cut school and drove the two hours to come pick me up and take me to the hospital,

and then he helped me file charges and arrange for academic leave."

Jun's horror at seeing Mike in the interview room, his pattern of choices around pro-bono cases, and his general disposition are all making more sense than they ever have before. Harvey thinks of what it must have been like. "Did he take a plea bargain?"

A single shake of her head. "His family had money. They hired very good lawyers."

Harvey's stomach clenches. He knows precisely what good lawyers do to battered partners, how they tear them down, make them seem weak, their stories implausible, foolish, even. "I'm sorry."

"I survived," she says, soft but sure. "And I went into medicine and I did what I wanted with my life, but I didn't-- Men weren't on the agenda."

"Until Mike." Safe, oh so safe, Mike.

She reaches out with both hands and captures Harvey's left hand between them. "He's a gift. As a friend, boyfriend, grandson, employee, lover, he's-- He has survived, too. And we both want more for each other than safety, as nice as it is."

Even having known only fleeting bits of safety—largely with Mike—Harvey can understand. "All right."

She stands. "I have to get back to work. Dinner next Wednesday? Nine-ish?"

"Call Donna. She'll make sure I remember."

She squeezes his shoulder. "See you then."

He watches her walk away and then cleans up after them. It's late where Mike is, he'll call in the morning. He'll let Mike talk about whatever feels right, safest.

\*

He catches Mike around noon his time and opens with, "I had lunch with Hui today."

Mike smiles nervously. "Oh. Um."

It takes Harvey a second to process the expression on Mike's face, but when he realizes what it is, things fall into place. "You didn't do anything wrong, Mike. This isn't-- You don't have to be ashamed."

"I was going to tell you. I was. I just, at first didn't know what to say, or how to explain that I was really okay, and then I didn't know how to say that I *hadn't* said anything and it just... I was going to tell you."

"You had the right not to," Harvey tells him, worried Mike, even now, doesn't actually know his rights when it comes to Harvey.

Mike wraps his arms around himself, managing to look tiny and young even in the power suit he's got on, one of the ones Harvey consulted on with Rene. "It's not about that. It's not like I was going to tell you

because you used to own me. I was going to tell you because I wanted you to know, because you're you."

Harvey vaguely suspects that should not make him as happy as it does. "I know now. Are you-- How are you holding up?"

Mike shrugs. "I feel like a coward, mostly. I didn't lose her, not really, not the parts that matter between us, so there's not a lot to miss. That other stuff, it was just...something we both needed to work on, something we were okay working on together."

Harvey tries to follow Mike's train of thought, but eventually has to just ask, "Why a coward?"

"Because we'd both known for a while that it had to happen, but I waited until she brought it up. She's very—she doesn't hide. I hide."

Harvey shakes his head. "She hides in her own way. And at the risk of sounding like Dr. Teng, experience teaches us survival tactics unique to us. You may be slow to move and unsure of yourself, but you're not a coward, Mike."

Mike looks at Harvey for a long time after that. Harvey suspects he's looking *for* something, but Harvey cannot guess as to what that might be. It's possible Mike finds it, though, because the shadows in his eyes lighten just a bit. He changes the subject. "Did I tell you I've started training in wushu?"

"How long?"

"Few weeks, almost a month now."

Harvey raises an eyebrow. "You've forgotten to mention a lot of things, recently."

Mike smiles, rueful. "Yeah, well, I wanted to know how bad I sucked at it before I brought it up."

"How bad?"

Mike laughs. "Not as bad as I would have thought."

Harvey witnessed a sanda contest once, his first time in China. The men sparring had been professionals, but still, Harvey can't help but wonder what Mike looks like learning those moves, perfecting them. He says, "You like it."

"It-- Sometimes, when I'm doing it, I feel like I know my body again, like it's something I could trust again, maybe, someday."

*You're really, really not a coward.* Harvey nods a little. "Manufacturing contract between Olchem and Wuhan still driving you crazy?"

Mike makes a face. "And how."

\*

In late October, Jessica tells Harvey, "I need you to go and seduce the Hua Xia people."

Harvey can't help laughing. He keeps it short and full of ironic amusement, but he laughs all the same.

Jessica raises an eyebrow. "Did you just laugh at me?"

"What?" Harvey asks, flattening his expression into pure innocence.

"Watch it, Specter."

He rolls his eyes, he can't help himself. "You have your best people for that market over there. I like being indispensable as much or far more than the next person, but my ego does not actually make me an idiot."

She rolls her eyes right back at him, but more pointedly. "Go see your best friend, Harvey. Look in on my satellite office. Bring me a new client. It'll be fun."

It will be, and Harvey will do it, but he can hear Donovan's laughter in his ear, Mike's self-doubts putting him to shame. So he will do it, but he won't pretend he's doing it because Jessica is his boss and because she has told him to. Mike deserves better. Jessica deserves better. "My best friend is sitting in this room with me."

It's been a long time since Harvey has seen Jessica surprised. He's not sure he remembers the last time. She doesn't blink or give any obvious indicators, but there's a sort of reserve in her eyes that he knows, if not from familiarity than from an absolute lack of it. Slowly, she says, "This is not a criticism, but you've changed."

Harvey tells her, "It's all right, Donovan had to point it out to me."

There's laughter in her eyes, but she doesn't give into it. "I don't doubt it. For the record, I'd noticed, it just happened slowly and I suppose I didn't expect any road signs."

"Road signs," Harvey says flatly.

"You know, school zone ahead, deer crossing, the obvious moments."

"You just compared my emotional growth to mammalian roaming patterns."

"Not entirely inappropriate." She gives him that smile, the one that manages to be fond and yet completely superior at the same time. Harvey likes to think he has perfected it on Jun, but he suspects he has a way to go.

"Hua Xia, huh?" he asks.

"Mike has everything you need to know. Work with him on it for the next week, you leave on Sunday."

Harvey thinks of something else. "Does *he* know?"

"Where would the fun in that be?" Jessica does innocent better than any actually innocent person Harvey has ever met.

Harvey smiles. "Thank you."

She waves a hand. "Thank me with a new client."

"That's a foregone conclusion. I feel my gratitude is infinitely more rare and valuable."

"What was that about your ego not making you an idiot?" Jessica's out the door before he can answer. Over the PA, Donna snorts.

\*

"I need you to catch me up on Hua Xia, particularly the stuff that nobody but you has noticed."

Mike says, "Hi, Harvey, how's your day been? Mine's good, thanks for asking. Also, sure, but why?"

Harvey favors him with a smile. "Because Jessica's sending me out to close them in less than a week and your legal responses were developed by me."

"Jessica's-- Wait, rewind." Mike holds up a hand. "You're coming here?"

Harvey gives him a don't-be-slow look that he knows Mike will interpret to hold all the annoying fondness it does. "Sunday. So pull it together and be helpful."

Mike grins. "Harvey! That's awesome! Hey, I know, I've been putting off going to the wall for something, I didn't even know what, but you wanna go?"

Harvey's been to The Great Wall, of course, he went the first time he was in China. If it were anyone else being this enthused, *anyone*, he would roll his eyes. It's not, though, so he says, "Close these guys first, then wall climbing."

"Yeah, 'course."

Mike throws a veritable wall of information at him then, and Harvey finds himself relaxing, because as well as he works with Jun, it's even easier with Mike, who seems to get the patterns Harvey works in, and is good at spicing financial reports up with moments of sneak-attack snark. They've been at the catch-up session for hours when Donna pops in and places food in front of Harvey, stealing Mike for a chat session while ordering Harvey to eat. Harvey obeys, but only because he knows Donna misses Mike, and deserves some time with him as well.

Somewhere around hour six, when they've moved from catch-up into planning, Jun joins. Mike freezes and Harvey realizes they haven't seen each other since the break up. Jun peers over Harvey's shoulder and asks, "Isn't it past your bed time?"

Mike smiles, cautiously, and says, "He's a slave driver."

Harvey's stomach feels tight at the choice of words, but he lets it go, because it's Mike, and Mike's allowed. Jun says, "Tell me about it."

Mike says, "I, uh, it's good to see you." It comes out more uncertain than Mike probably intends.

Jun nods. "You too. Stop being an awkward stranger." With that he sits down and joins in on their pow-wow.

By the time Harvey leaves the office, it's hard to remember that Hua Xia's not yet in the Pearson Hardman stable. By the sheer force of their combined brain powers, Harvey's pretty sure it should have just happened. Then again, in that case, he couldn't go to China. Every once in a while, reality has its finer moments.

\*

No sooner has Harvey freed himself from the due process of customs in Shanghai than he has two armfuls full of Mike, laughing against his neck and holding on for dear life. Harvey considers wiggling free for all of a second before acknowledging that it's been too damn long since he's been the recipient of a hug from Mike, too long without the kind of touch he's unwittingly grown used to. Instead, Harvey hugs back and says, "You've lost weight."

Mike pulls away and makes a face. "There was a thing that happened I didn't mention because you would have just been grossed out. Fairly, because I was totally grossed out."

"A *thing* that happened?"

"I got sick, okay?" Mike starts walking toward the exit.

Harvey follows Mike and uses the distraction of his need to avoid physical contact with other people to keep from thinking about the last time Mike took ill. "We talk almost every day."

"Yeah, well, tapeworm doesn't really cause a huge difference on the surface."

Harvey struggles for something to say that does not prove Mike right about him being grossed out. In the end, he settles for, "Are you being more careful about what you eat?"

Mike rolls his eyes. "Half the office got it. We're pretty sure it happened at a client dinner. There was some kind of outbreak that they later contained. The same thing happened in Michigan last year. Tapeworms are persistent little fuckers."

It's possible Harvey's face is not as blank as he would prefer, because Mike laughs at him. "Relax, I've been making sure everything is cooked really well. I will send you back worm-free."

"Oh, that I believe. You have Jessica to answer to if you don't."

"Way not to use fear as a motivator." Mike snorts.

Harvey feels something settle in him at the way Mike says it so flippantly, so very *unafraid*. Harvey just manages to keep himself from reaching out and ruffling Mike's hair, trailing his fingers over Mike's neck. Instead he asks, "What time is our meeting?"

"You've got a couple of hours to freshen up. You have a room at the Pudong Shangri-la, which is within walking distance of the office and somewhere I've wanted to see the inside of for a while." Mike grins.

"Made friends with the office manager, did you?"

"Donna taught me to spot where the power is located. I'm just doing her proud."

"I'll be sure to report that back."

A car is waiting for them when they fight their way past the crowds and out to the curb. Mike opens the door and they both slip inside. Mike says something to the driver in Chinese. Harvey murmurs, "You're getting better at that."

"I do live in a country where they speak it," Mike points out, clearly unimpressed by his ability to absorb another language the way a towel holds water.

Harvey's tired from the fourteen hours of flight, and the fact that at home he would be in bed by now, or at least seriously contemplating it. He leans back into the car's upholstery and lets Mike's chatter about logistics and things that have happened over the last week and the new bike path he's just found in a park near to his apartment, wash over him. He's careful not to fall asleep, but it's calming, Mike being this near.

Harvey asks, "Anywhere to play basketball over here?"

Mike smiles. "Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"Courts are plentiful, but there's a four-on-four half-court game rule due to crowding. Rotating teams, third gets to play winner."

Harvey is undeterred. "Have another two we can press-gang into service?"

"Childers' PA graduated Vanderbilt on a basketball scholarship. She's a little hardcore, but fun all the same. And there's a senior associate who sucks at everything but assists, but is a good sport about it. I'll organize everything."

"Glad to hear you're making friends."

"I'm a likeable guy."

"I know," Harvey tells him. Harvey knows all too well.

\*

If Harvey were the type to admit to things like nerves or discomfort, he would probably admit he's feeling a little bit off about stepping into what is so clearly Childers' territory. He's always had a civil relationship with the older man, even if the two of them have crossed each other's paths relatively rarely. Usually, Harvey doesn't mind having to step on toes, but then, usually, those people deserve to have their toes stepped on. Childers, so far as Harvey can tell, does not.

As such, after Harvey has showered and gotten himself into appropriate work attire, he has Mike take him back to the office, where he can have some face time with Childers and at least make sure that if there is tension, it won't affect their work.

When Childers' PA waves Harvey in, Harvey strides into the room and holds his hand out. "Been a long time."

Childers takes it, his shake firm but not challenging. "How was the flight?"

"Restful," Harvey lies. In fairness, the flight staff was very accommodating and the ride was smooth, he just had things on his mind, non-work things, but he isn't going to talk about that with a colleague he barely knows.

Childers' smile calls him on the lie, but Harvey is all right with that. Childers motions for him to sit down and Harvey does so. There are few, very few, standard rules of negotiation Harvey bothers to remember, let alone use, but one of the few is that forcing the other party to be the first to speak is a solidly advantageous approach. This is not always true. Harvey thinks it probably is right at this moment.

When Childers does speak up, though, what he says is not what Harvey expects to hear. "Mike's going to be your translator on this deal. He can be a little slow, but he's very accurate and people respond well to him. He's extremely good at the minutiae of manners important at this stage in the game."

Harvey does his best not to think about the most likely reason Mike is good at that kind of thing, about the ways Mike has been trained and has trained himself in order to survive. "You're...leaving this to Mike and me?"

"Is there a good reason I shouldn't?" Childers looks curious, but not as though he's expecting an answer in the positive.

"This is your office."

"And my boss sent you here to close a highly lucrative client for it. It's not as if I won't get to play in the future, Harvey. And it's also not as if I suspect you of vying for my position. This isn't a power game, and so I'm hard pressed to care what you do so long as it brings me more billables."

In the face of such easy generosity, Harvey promises, "I will."

"Word of advice?"

Harvey spreads his hands, palms upward, in acceptance. Childers tells him, "Trust Mike to do as he will. He's very good at reading situations, almost eerily so."

Harvey should leave it at that. He finds himself unable. "He's been an asset?"

Childers' expression manages to be both ironic and pensive at the same time. "If I was inclined to worry about my job, then I would concern myself with the day he decides to get himself a license to practice."

Harvey is not sure what expression crosses *his* face—a disconcerting experience in and of itself—but it must be readable, since Childers tilts his head and says, "Jessica sent you to see him in action."

*Mostly just to see him.* Harvey shrugs. "She took a risk on him. I have insight into the situation and she trusts my judgment."



Childers nods. "Well, you can take back a positive report card. The kid has a lot of experience lacking, but for sheer instinct I haven't seen anything like him, ever."

Harvey wishes he weren't proud. He doesn't have the right to be, not really, not when Mike's being here is largely attributable to Mike holding on long enough, having enough strength to grow past his own terror to get to this point. Nonetheless, he can feel the soft-edged hum of pride in his chest. "She'll be pleased to hear."

"Mm," Childers says thoughtfully. Then, "Pleasure to see you again."

Harvey takes it as the dismissal it's meant to be and stands. "You as well. I'll send you an update after the meeting."

Harvey leaves the office and goes to find Mike. It's the first time he's acknowledged how eager he is to watch him in action, see who this kid who's burning a path of fire and creation through the Shanghai office is. It's both exciting and weird for there to be an aspect of Mike Harvey doesn't know inside and out. He likes the delicious anticipatory spread of the feeling through him. For the first time in a long time, Harvey's up for the thrill of the unknown.

\*

Childers is right. Harvey does most of the work because a) he's the lawyer, and b) Jessica trusted him with this job, not Mike. That said, when Harvey does sit back and let Mike take the lead, it is impressive to watch. Harvey realizes Mike has had to learn to read people, to anticipate needs and wants and displeasure. That knowledge is uncomfortable, but watching the results is fairly intriguing.

By the end of the meeting, Harvey and Mike have them hooked; it's really just a matter of formalities. They agree to a second meeting the following day and Mike and Harvey go back to the office to do final checks on all the paperwork.

At a little after six, the tallest woman Harvey has ever seen peers into Mike's office and asks, "We still on for a game?"

Harvey belatedly recognizes her as Childers' PA. She was sitting when he saw her earlier. Mike looks up and says, "Yeah. You wanna collect Jake?"

"On it."

"I didn't bring a change of clothes," Harvey says.

"I went through your bag and brought it for you."

"Because that's not creepy."

Mike smiles, the oh-so-innocent smile he only uses when he's well aware he's been caught red-handed. "Nothing I haven't seen before."

Harvey rolls his eyes, but takes the clothes Mike holds out to him and goes to change. The court is about a mile away, so the four of them walk. It's cold out, but there's a decent amount of sun; it's good playing weather.

Jake is as bad as Mike suggested, and Hope is better than any of them. Harvey is really unconcerned about the game itself, so long as he can catch glimpses of Mike's smile across the court, and listen to the trash talk Mike is sometimes, occasionally, confident enough to join in on. Even with Jake as a handicap, Hope thrashes them. Harvey has never enjoyed losing quite so much.

Mike and he go back to the office afterward and tie things up, but at nine Mike packs up and takes Harvey back to the hotel. Harvey doesn't argue. Underneath the adrenaline of being near Mike and getting these clients in the fold, he's exhausted from the day's events.

After Harvey showers, Mike asks, "Mind if I--?"

Harvey really doesn't at all. He hadn't noticed Mike bringing over a change of clothes, but then, as mentioned, he's pretty tired. Harvey answers a couple of emails from Jessica and Donna before finding that his eyes are sliding closed of their own accord.

He's pretty much asleep when he feels the bed shift, smells the lemon-verberna of the hotel soap. Mike whispers, "I thought I could stay here. If that's okay."

Harvey pulls back the covers. "Quiet time, now."

Mike laughs softly, then falls silent.

\*

When Mike falls into bed with him on the second night after Childers has wined and dined them and their new client—thank you—Harvey asks, "Do you not like your apartment?"

Mike asks in return, "Does this bother you?"

It decidedly does not, but that's really not the point. "Mike."

"It's fine, Harvey. It's a nice place."

"But?"

Mike squirms a little, but answers. "I got kinda used to living with someone. It's a little lonely, okay?"

Harvey shifts, the sleepiness driven out of him by discomfort. "Are you angry?"

Mike frowns. "Angry?"

"Early on, you—you didn't want emancipation, you said before had been—"

"Lonely." Mike pauses. "That wasn't all I said. And no, I'm not angry at you for pushing the point. You were right to. I'm not starving and I'm not desperate and I'm not *alone*, the way I was. I'm just lonely. And I think maybe that's not such a bad experience to have, the same as homesickness."

Harvey feels the jaw in his muscle tighten. "All right."

Mike must hear Harvey's uncertainty, because he adds, "Besides, I didn't have to come to China. That was my choice. You would've helped me find a job in the city if I hadn't wanted to go."

Mike's faith in him is settling and terrifying all at once, but all the best things in Harvey's life have been. Harvey might not have the quiet, fighting strength of Mike, but what he does have has gotten him this far and he doesn't plan to let it fail him now, when it matters most. "Yes."

"I don't regret coming here, or freeing myself, maybe even—"

Harvey waits him out. Mike draws a shaky breath. "Sometimes I think everything was worth it, is all."

Harvey feels that way about those first months of hellacious uncertainty, but Harvey wasn't tortured for the better part of a year. Mike's admission humbles a part of Harvey he wasn't aware still existed. He feels like he should say something, should acknowledge Mike's confession in some way, but he makes his living with words and he is entirely sure there are no good ones for this moment. Instead, he reaches out and pulls Mike closer. Mike doesn't resist, if anything he comes eagerly and Harvey realizes that the kid might not be *hungry*, but he is touch-starved.

Harvey lets him burrow in, runs a hand along his spine and says, "You're good."

Mike just squeezes Harvey more tightly. It hurts a little. Harvey doesn't mind.

\*

The weather is miserable outside Beijing, cold and rainy and not appropriate for outside activities at all. Mike scrambles up the steps at the entry juncture to the Great Wall all the same, excited as a puppy let outside for the first time in months. Harvey takes the stairs at a more sedate pace, but follows all the same, uncomplaining about the weather, not even minding as much as he's fairly sure he should.

Harvey remembers his first time on the Wall, his sense of being overwhelmed by the scope of it and already too far in his Pearson Hardman persona to be willing to show his feelings. Mike, unsurprisingly, has none of Harvey's reserve. He's taking pictures of pretty much everything; Harvey has no doubt he'll show up in more than a few, tousled and wet.

There's graffiti chipped, carved into the stone all along the way. Chinese characters that have no meaning to Harvey, but were important enough to someone to scrape away at rocks that have stood for two thousand years. Harvey runs his fingers over the indentations, his gaze still on Mike, who's making his way rapidly up the Wall.

Harvey tilts his head back a little, letting the rain hit his face, his lips. He takes a breath and moves, working his way to Mike. He's barely reached Mike when Mike starts spewing information at him, dates and facts and history. Harvey listens, even knowing he'll retain less than half.

They reach a parapet, an offshoot rising up over the main body of the Wall. Even with the rain, the grey cast of the day, Harvey can see for miles, what feels like a close approximation of forever. Before he can let himself think about it, Harvey says, "You should come home for Thanksgiving."

"Gram misses me, huh?" Then, "You are visiting, right?"

"Mike, we Skype from her place once a week."

"You agreed to three times a week, with phone calls on the days when you weren't there."

"Like you don't call and get all this information from her."

Mike laughs. "Guilty as charged."

Harvey rolls his eyes. "Clearly, I've taught you nothing."

"Yeah, yeah, admission is for the weak."

"Of course she misses you. I'm not an acceptable substitute."

Mike nods. "I'll talk with Childers. I don't know if we're shutting the office down, seeing as how it's a working day here. And for all I know the others might have already asked for the week."

Because Mike gives so damn easily, not demanding anything else from Harvey when he probably knows he could, Harvey says softly, "I wasn't asking for her."

"You weren't asking at all," Mike says cheekily.

There are some things, though, that will probably never lie well with Harvey, not between the two of them. "I wasn't ordering, either."

"If you were, I'd've had the right to ignore it, so all's well."

Mike's verbalization of his rights allows Harvey to breathe a little easier, even if he wonders, just a little, whether the fact that Mike knows his rights equals Mike being *able* to ignore a command. But Harvey realizes that to push at this point is to be a condescending prick, so he backs off.

Mike says, "I miss you, too, y'know?"

It is unfair for Harvey to take those words, especially as he's relatively certain he doesn't deserve them, not when he hasn't really risked anything to gain them. Harvey has never claimed to be selfless, though, or non-opportunistic, and even if now would be the time to start, he doubts he's going to. What Harvey can say is, "Tickets are on me."

Mike looks ready to argue, but after a minute he says, "Early Christmas present," and then walks away before Harvey can deny the point.

"Something like that," Harvey says softly. After all, there's no rule against getting someone more than one.

\*

Harvey wants nothing more than to go straight home when he finally manages to free himself from the confines of JFK, but when Ray opens the door to the car, Harvey tells him, "Vivian's place."

Vivian grins, bright and unfettered, when she sees him, and once he's near enough, envelopes him in a hug that rivals anything he can remember receiving from anyone, save perhaps Mike and—on one memorable occasion—Donna. Harvey drowns the urge to struggle free in the more instinctive, deeper one to stay precisely where he is. In the end, she is the one to let go.

Harvey slips the bangle of pure white jade, the design of a phoenix surrounded by lingzhi gracing its surface, over her left wrist. "From Mike."

Below it, he clips a three row AAA round southsea shell pearl bracelet. "From me."

She fingers the jewelry and says quietly, "Boys." When she looks up at him, though, her expression is unbending. "Don't think this means I will forgive you if you have come back without photos."

Harvey retrieves his camera from his carry-on. "Nor should you."

They spend the next hour looking at the pictures, making fun of Mike's hair, Vivian fussing over his weight, Harvey telling her about how Mike is making waves in the China office. When he shuts the camera off, having reached the end of the series, he tells her, "He's trying to come home for the Thanksgiving holiday."

Vivian's expression is amused and warm even as it sharpens. "Is that so?"

"I—" Harvey finds himself hesitant to lie. "I made it clear it would be nice."

"Mm."

"Vivian. I—" Again, Harvey finds himself not knowing what to say or how to say it or even sure that he should say anything at all.

"I think," she says, slowly, carefully, "that it is time you started from the beginning."

Helplessly, Harvey tells her, "It's *his* story."

"I know. But I don't think either of us is particularly interested in making him tell it to me."

"He doesn't want you to know. He—"

"All children with parents or guardians who have done an even mildly decent job have moments when they wish to protect those who have raised them. The bitch of being a parent is that we often know when we're being protected. I don't think I have to tell you that it doesn't settle right. It just feels scary and uncertain."

Harvey runs a hand over his face, because she's right, but that does not change the basic fact that Mike would kick his ass for even contemplating this.

"Let me start for you. He did something he shouldn't have done to keep me here. Something illegal, maybe."

"No. No, it was legal." Harvey closes his eyes and thinks, at least this way, she won't always be conjuring something worse. "He took an Indebted contract."

He can see in her eyes that she knew and yet hadn't known all at once. He keeps talking, because he's sure if he stops he won't be able to start again and this will be unfinished between them in a way neither of them could handle. "The man who bought him was...unkind. I, ah, procured him. I meant—" Harvey flinches, unable to stop himself. "I meant to pass on his contract—"

"Sell him," Vivian says flatly.

"Please," Harvey says, because there's nothing else to say, except, "I'm sorry."

She's crying, silent, slow tears, her gaze on him, assessing. He finds he does have something else to say. "He would listen to you, if you told him to stay away from me. He loves you more than anything, still believes in you like every kid wants to believe in his parent."

Her eyes aren't any softer as she asks, "What made you change your mind about selling him?"

Harvey frowns. "He did."

"You fell in love."

Harvey wishes he could start lying now, but for the first time in so, so long, he doesn't even know how he would begin. "At first just with the feeling of being his universe, being needed, being safe for someone."

"At first," she repeats, a demand and a question all in one.

Harvey swallows. "He makes me be the person I want to be, better, maybe. I miss him when things are busy, and we go days without speaking. He's the first person I ask for advice when I've got a problem. I've never been in love before, but if I had to imagine what it feels like, it would be this."

"He's in love with you, you realize?" The words are a little angry.

"I think he loves easily. Irresponsibly, even, at times." Harvey wishes he could believe Mike's love to be real, to be equivalent to this mess of feelings that has taken over Harvey's previously well-ordered life.

"You're an idiot." The anger is gone, which surprises Harvey. Oh, there's still a remnant of dissatisfaction, maybe even disappointment. But she's willing to sound fond again.

Cautiously, Harvey tries, "But an idiot you're willing to put up with, if not aid and abet?"

"Well. You *did* bring me pearls."

\*

Everything seems to slow down in the interminable wait for Thanksgiving—and Mike—to arrive. At the same time, it manages to be Thanksgiving before Harvey can so much as blink. The two are logically incompatible, and yet, somehow both true.

Harvey drives himself to the airport in the Barracuda, aware that for all the times he's had Mike as a passenger in one of the club cars, he's never taken him out in this, the car Harvey belongs to every bit as much as it belongs to him. Mike's plane gets in at nearly midnight, just as the clock is ticking over into the actual Thanksgiving Day. He looks rumpled and wan and real. He barrels into Harvey, just as before, in Shanghai, despite it not having been that long, not really.

Harvey holds on and murmurs, "I should mention that my brother and his wife are staying in your room."

"Good thing your bed is so big," Mike mutters back.

"Presumptuous little shit," Harvey throws off, but it lacks heat, particularly given that they're still hugging, and Harvey's thumb is stroking at the back of Mike's neck.

Mike makes a sound that's mostly agreement. "I need a burger. Now."

"C'mon," Harvey says, and pulls back, taking Mike's bag from him. Mike rolls his eyes, but allows the gesture.

When they get to the car, Mike's eyes light up. "Holy shit. You drove Davina."

"She prefers Davey," Harvey says, but he's smiling, glad Mike gets it. He opens the door for Mike, and Mike's too busy appreciating Harvey's girl to even fuss about it. Harvey closes the door and runs a hand over Davey's roof as a gesture of gratitude.

Once they're on the road, windows down despite the bite of late November air, Mike says, "The burger can wait a bit."

Harvey laughs, and takes the scenic route. In the end, though, he takes them to Mike's favorite all-night diner, a greasy spoon that makes Harvey want to shower after he's left, but also, admittedly, serves the best chocolate malt anywhere on the eastern seaboard.

Harvey orders his malt, Mike his two burgers, fries, and a strawberry milkshake. Mike talks about work, mostly stuff Harvey knows from their daily conversations, but that's easy to chat about. Harvey tells him Hui and Jun have claimed the two of them for dinner Friday night, and something eases in him at the relaxed smile it produces from Mike.

Mike asks about Donovan, but Harvey just shakes his head. "You'll meet him."

"Okay, but Gram first thing tomorrow morning."

"I'm far more afraid of what *she* would do to me were that not to happen, than you, but she's coming over to my place for the day, so the point is moot."

Harvey has seen years where the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree didn't light up quite as bright as Mike at this news. "That's-- We

haven't had a real Thanksgiving dinner together in, I mean, not since she had to go in the home."

Which probably only means Harvey should have done this earlier. Regrets have never gotten him anywhere, though, so he nods. "She snitched about all your favorites."

Mike shrugs. "Yeah, but I can actually *make* hers."

Harvey doesn't doubt it. In fact, he bets Mike has been able to since he could reach the stove and was allowed to turn it on. Mike gets a pensive look on his face before asking, "Do *you* have any favorites?"

Harvey doesn't, not really. His ambivalence toward holidays meant to be spent with people who give a shit about you—and vice versa—has long since spread to all accompanying traditions. He's struggling to find something, because Mike wants Harvey to and Harvey wants to give Mike anything and everything he wants.

Mike, though, knows Harvey, that's part of why they're in this situation. He kicks at Harvey's foot under the table and says, "That's fine. I'm sure I can find you a few."

\*

Harvey wakes to the chimes of Mike's phone alarm. Mike's already rustling around, looking half-asleep, but determined. They're not cuddlers, not exactly, but they have gravitated toward each other in the night, and Mike has to pull away. The immediate aftermath is cold, and if Harvey were the kind of man to pout, he would be doing so. The urge lessens slightly when Mike runs a hand through Harvey's hair and says, "Sorry, go back to sleep. Just wanna get the turkey on."

"I hired someone for that," Harvey mumbles. "They'll be here—"

"Nah, saw that coming, had Donna cancel."

Donna is a traitorous traitor, and Harvey will deal with her later. In the meantime, Mike has already slipped out of the room, and really, it does Harvey no good *not* to sleep some more when Mike has ordered him to do so. Even so, he manages to doze for less than an hour before he's itching to be out there, spending what time he has with Mike actually in the other man's presence.

Collette is pouring herself coffee when Harvey comes around the corner. Mike is working on something that is not a turkey. Donovan is skimming the paper. Harvey announces his presence with a rumbled, "'Morning."

Mike looks up from the hot pink concoction he's got going and grins. "I made lots of coffee."

Harvey would have preferred him coming back to bed, but he's willing to compromise. "Knew I invited you for a reason."

"Mm, what time is Gram coming?"

Harvey glances at the clock. "Couple of hours. Mike, have you met—"

"We introduced ourselves." Donovan says, smoothly, and Harvey



wonders what the hell else has been discussed in his absence.

"Mike has interesting stories," Collette says dryly. Collette and Donovan met in school. She's generally considered to be one of the foremost forensic psychologists on the west coast. Also, she scares Harvey more than Donna or Jessica could ever dream of doing.

Harvey pours himself coffee and drinks the first few sips black. "Well, he does live in China."

Collette's smile is insightful, as is her "Indeed."

Harvey highly suspects Donovan is hiding behind the business section in order to laugh at him. He takes a few more pulls of coffee and asks Mike, "Need any help?"

"Apples in the fridge. Sliced thinly, please."

Harvey pulls out the bag of apples he'd specifically gone upstate to an orchard to procure, since they honestly did taste better than the ones at the grocery store and Mike and he both love apples. Just the smell relaxes Harvey a little, once he's split the first one open. At some point, Mike steals a slice and Harvey almost cuts himself watching Mike casually feed it to himself.

This time Donovan doesn't even bother to hide his snicker. Harvey consoles himself with the fact that he can still beat Donovan up, should it become necessary.

After apples there are sweet potatoes, then leeks, then the crushing of pecans and before Harvey has a moment to shower, Vivian is there, and Mike is all but in her lap, careful of her but exuberant in his welcome. It's almost as hard to watch as their first reunion in its sheer rawness, but either Harvey has gotten better at handling that sort of thing, or the circumstances of this particular moment make it just a bit easier.

Mike comes back to the kitchen, but Harvey gets him to admit that everything that needs doing just then has been finished, and kicks him out to go spend time with Vivian. Donovan tugs Harvey down into a chair and cleans the dishes in the sink. Harvey says, "I really did hire someone for that. Donna knows better than to disobey that order."

"We'll let them handle the after-dinner dishes," Donovan says, and keeps washing.

Harvey goes to stand next to him, taking a towel and drying the dishes that have been washed and don't go in the dishwasher. To his surprise, Collette takes the towel from him and says, "You put away. I don't know where everything goes."

Her tone is casual and kind, the slide of her hand over his arm comforting. Harvey feels unsettled, but at the same time, calmed. Donovan has always told Harvey that Collette was just waiting to see the guy Donovan knew, but Harvey has also always assumed that man existed only in Donovan's mind. Now, though, he wonders.

He kisses Collette's cheek, sudden and without any intent to do so. Her smile is small but open, and the look on Donovan's face reminds Harvey of the few moments he has never wanted to jettison from childhood. Harvey smiles and takes a cutting board from Collette, turning to put it

away.

\*

Harvey eats more than he has ever eaten in his life. Mike makes the best stuffing ever to have been created and Harvey genuinely cannot stop himself. Mike is a little drunk by the time they reach the coffee and pie stage, so Harvey handles serving that course. Once Mike stopped eating like the food might disappear if he wasn't fast enough, he began to eat slowly, savoring everything. Harvey has seen it a million times, but he can't quite not pay attention.

When Vivian has taken her leave and promised to call Mike when she's back safely—rolling her eyes at Harvey over Mike's shoulder—the four left in the condo silently agree it is nap time and find the nearest flat, padded surface to colonize. Mike and he sprawl on the couch, dozing in the late afternoon sun.

Harvey wakes first, which is unsurprising, given that jetlag has to be catching up with Mike. He chats quietly with Donovan and Collette and does a little work. Eventually, as the sun is setting, Mike staggers in and yawns. "Didn't mean to sleep that long."

Casually, Harvey tells him, "I booked the complex's court. If you're interested."

Mike grins. "Lemme put on some shoes."

"It's on the third floor," Harvey tells Donovan. "Also, there's an intercom setting, if you want something."

"I think we can manage for an hour or so," Donovan replies.

Harvey may be many things, but he's actually not a crap host, so despite Donovan's reassurance, Harvey makes sure Collette and Donovan know where everything is before Mike and he take the main elevators down to the court. It's not regulation size, but it's bigger than the half court they had in China, and it's all theirs. Like the rest of the building, the walls are panels of glass, so it almost feels as if they're playing in the sky. Better yet, unlike the two-on-two play in China, one-on-one allows Harvey to defend against Mike, and be defended against in return. The game that was about permission to touch in one way has become about permission in another way, and Harvey runs with it.

At first Harvey thinks he's imagining Mike also taking advantage, getting close more often than he would otherwise, staying on Harvey even when he knows he's going to get tripped or thrown to the ground. It's been a while since they've played regularly, so Harvey thinks he might just have forgotten. Then Mike's mouth brushes against his ear and Harvey knows he's forgotten nothing, doesn't have the ability to forget anything, not when it comes to Mike, to this.

He beats Mike, but only by one point, and he's neither jetlagged nor still burning off the wine from lunch. It's a good game. They stretch on the court afterward, downing water, an easy silence between them.

Mike breaks it in the elevator by saying, "Dr. Teng is pretty insistent that desire and terror aren't mutually exclusive."

Harvey leans back against the side of the elevator. "She was right in

the instance of Hui."

"Hui was as scared as I was."

Haltingly, Harvey admits, "I'm not sure that doesn't apply to me."

The elevator opens and the two of them step out, but don't move toward the condo, standing in the hallway. Mike hugs the ball to his chest, tightly. "It's different."

"Yes," Harvey agrees. "Because she was afraid of her own memories, and I'm afraid of yours. But that's not a death knell. You've managed worse fear, and somewhere along the way, I'm sure I have, too. Plus, you know how I feel about losing."

Mike's smile is tight, edgy. "This isn't a case, Harvey."

"No, a game. The same one I've been playing ever since I picked up my damn cards that night. The stakes just keep getting higher, is all."

"That...really shouldn't make me feel better." Mike makes a face at him.

Harvey laughs, more relieved than amused. "Maybe not, but I think you trust me to win."

Mike rolls his eyes. "G-d help me."

Harvey smirks. "G-d help us all."

\*

Harvey takes Mike into work on Friday, leaving Donovan free to visit the Met with Collette, because the two of them never pass up a chance when in town. It's a quiet day at the office. The associates are there, because they know better than not to be, and Jessica's taking advantage of the relative calmness to get caught up on less important aspects of business that generally get pushed to the side. Donna has the day off, and most of the partners, junior and senior, have taken it.

Jun is waiting in Harvey's office. Harvey would like to think this is because his associate is super efficient and ahead of the game—which is true—but he knows it's mostly because Jun has been waiting for them to show up so he can drag Mike to the coffee room and catch up for at least an hour. Harvey lasts for all of twelve minutes before he goes to join them. Mike is a bad influence on his work ethic.

They aren't in the break room, so Harvey makes a casual circuit of the floor to discover them in Jessica's office. There are also, evidently, cranberry scones in Jessica's office, along with a box of Aroma coffee. Harvey does his best to make his scowl at Jessica refined and mature. Jessica smirks. "Wondering when you'd join."

Harvey does not say anything about not having been extended an invitation, because that would imply he needs one. Mike hands him a scone and pours him a cup of coffee and that soothes Harvey's irritation, for the most part. Jessica's gaze is on him and he knows she sees everything he doesn't want her to, but that's par for the course between them and it was only a matter of time.

He takes a seat and Mike goes back to talking business: how the

satellite office operates, what the strengths and weaknesses are, some thoughts on improvement. Every once in a while Mike will run something by Jun, something premised on the Chinese culture he's observed. For the most part, Jun agrees, deferring when he feels like he doesn't have enough sense of day-to-day Chinese life to chime in.

When the scones have been polished off, and Jessica has also grilled Mike on how *he's* doing under the guise of gathering more firm-related information, she sends all of them off to, "Actually work for a change."

Jun follows them back to Harvey's office and Harvey doesn't protest.

They leave early, even Jun, cutting out at five, meeting up with Collette and Donovan at Motorino's in the East village. Hui arrives a little bit later, in scrubs sporting fall leaves, her hair messy in its ponytail and smelling of disinfectant. Mike's smile when he sees her is radiant, and for a moment, Harvey is sharply jealous. It fades after a second, both due to the ridiculousness of the sentiment, and the way Mike stands close enough to him that they're touching even as he continues to talk with Hui.

For a second, Hui catches Harvey's eye and her smile is tired but pleased, like she knew where this was going, like she's relieved. Harvey squeezes her shoulder as he passes her on the way to their table. Then he orders the wine and lets the waiter know the tab is on him.

\*

Saturday morning, Harvey leaves Mike sleeping in bed and heads down to the gym. It takes him a while to bleed off all the energy under his skin that Mike's nearness has left in him. When he's managed, or at least mostly, he heads back up to find Donovan and Mike on the couch, speaking quietly. Mike looks up when Harvey walks in the door. Mike says, "Jesus, it's the Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend, you overactive freak."

Harvey walks into his kitchen and pours himself a glass of water, allowing Mike the distraction technique. He does throw in, "Not all of us can be content living the life of a sloth."

"Yeah, I'm special that way," Mike agrees, and goes for more coffee. Donovan wanders in as well, sitting at the counter and watching them like the shrink he is. Harvey really should have tried harder to steer him into a respectable career, like fire-eating or topiary designer.

Mike doesn't seem scarred by whatever they were talking about, so Harvey lets it go. "Where's Collette?"

"She went for a run."

Harvey wonders if she was feeling the same restlessness as him, or if that was just an excuse to facilitate some alone time between Donovan and Mike. Either way, he harasses Mike into making enough breakfast for about six, given that two of them have been burning calories all morning long.

The four of them spend the day playing Scrabble and Risk, picking up conversations and dropping them as easily, eating leftovers and generally being lazy and content in each other's company. Donovan and Collette take a red-eye back that evening, which means Harvey and

Mike have the whole of the condo to themselves again. It feels cavernous and yet, familiar.

Harvey tells Mike to put his shoes on, and without realizing he's going to, finds himself taking Mike on a date. It's nothing fancy: more pizza, because Mike misses it and there's a dive they both like that's walkable from Harvey's place. Then a cab up to Lalo's, which is always cramped enough to require touch. They're both a little giddy from the sugar when they get back to the condo.

Harvey asks, "Movie?"

"What were you thinking?"

Harvey wasn't, but at that moment he remembers the first movie they ever watched together, when Mike wasn't expressing opinions and Harvey needed something that restored his faith in the universe at large. "Day The Earth Stood Still."

Mike smiles. "Yeah."

Helen has just reached Gort when Mike, who has been resting between Harvey's legs, his back to Harvey's chest, shifts so they are facing. Harvey reaches his hand up to fit the palm against Mike's cheek. "Okay?"

Mike answers by way of raising his lips to Harvey's. The kiss is clumsy and dry and Harvey really doesn't want it to end. He pulls at Mike a little, lowering himself so Mike isn't partially twisted and Harvey at least gives the appearance of being at his mercy.

Mike's mouth brushes against Harvey's ear. "I-- I can be *really* good at this, if you want."

The offer is shaky. It dampens some of Harvey's enthusiasm. "No, Mike. *No.*"

Harvey keeps his eyes on Mike, this Mike, who's not starving, not afraid of him, not down on his knees or bent over the back of a chair, whose scars are nothing more than silken pink markers of a time in his life. This Mike, who is curling into Harvey instead of away from him.

Mike murmurs, "With Hui, it was...scary, but familiar from Before, and not connected to Then, y'know?"

Harvey doesn't, but he follows the logic, so he says, "Yes."

"It's-- *This* is more complicated."

That Harvey agrees with fully. "I know. I do, but—but neither of us are in his power anymore. We get to call the shots, now."

"That feels...overwhelming."

Harvey can appreciate the sentiment. "Do you like being here, like this?"

"Yes."

"Then let's stay here."

Mike presses with a, "The thing is, I'm pretty sure I would like kissing you, too. Really kissing."

"The offer's open, but only to you, not Mikey."

Mike shudders at the use of the pejorative nickname, and Harvey keeps his hold on Mike strong, but escapable. Mike settles, though, without trying to get away. Finally, he asks, "Open indefinitely?"

Harvey nods. "Until you're ready."

"Maybe not tonight, then."

"Okay." Harvey means it. He can wait. He can't remember the last time he felt this patient about anything.

"I can stay here, right?"

Harvey rumples the hem of Mike's t-shirt, splaying his fingers over the warm skin of Mike's lower back. "I'd like that."

\*

Monday morning, Donna follows Harvey into his office despite him giving absolutely no indication that company is welcome. It's really not. She's barely let the door shut behind her when she asks, "Aw, did you get yourself a puppy?"

"What?"

"Did someone kick it?" she continues, all full up of false sympathy.

"I say this with all due and proper respect: fuck off."

She raises one perfectly-sculpted eyebrow. "Oh, we're resorting to potty language, now?"

He scowls. "Donna, Mike's flight was—"

She cuts him off. "At midnight, I know. And you drove him there yourself, because the other option was saying goodbye earlier, and you're having serious empty-nest syndrome."

"No, really, get out."

She does not. "Your options are to be nice or to labor through the day without the myriad niceties I needlessly add to your life."

"Those are not options," Harvey attempts to point out smoothly, but he's aware it comes out more as a grumble.

"Second one, then?" Donna says sweetly.

Harvey gives her his very best glare, the one that intimidates even Jun when Harvey puts the full force of his disapproval behind it. Donna doesn't seem to notice. Rather, she holds up the large coffee cup she's got in her right hand and waits. Harvey gives. She hands the coffee over and tells him, "I didn't schedule you for anything until after his flight lands, and you can check in."

"Not caring was a better life plan," he tells her, neither petulant or angry, just tired and lonely in a way he's never been.

"The cracks were starting to show before him," she says softly. "If someone had to be your fault line, you could have chosen worse."

"He lives in China." Harvey takes a sip of coffee and goes to sit down.

"And strangely, that's kind of the least of the problems the two of you have had to overcome."

"This is not the moment for practicality."

Donna smiles and sits across the desk from him. "I well recognize that patience is not your foremost skill, but I have seen you practice it. Both with clients, and, more extensively, with him. Does he *want* to come back?"

"I haven't asked. I don't know how to."

"Worried about undue influence?" she quips.

"To not be would be the definition of willful blindness," Harvey shoots back.

"Nice, Harvey," she reminds him.

"Donna—"

"If he didn't want to come back, would you go to him?"

Harvey opens his mouth, then closes it, considering. It would mean giving up his job, and his city and his home. It would mean being across the globe from Jessica and Donna and Donovan. It would mean having Mike, every day, close enough to touch. "Maybe."

Donna's silent for a moment. "Have Jun find out if Mike would think about coming back."

"That's stretching the level of abuse of power I'm willing to engage in."

She rolls her eyes. "As a friend, Harvey."

"Because that's not less questionable, or anything."

"Life is sticky. Learn to deal."

Harvey has spent the better part of his life, however, keeping himself unstuck. It is continuously annoying to realize that he now has to deal with the same things everyone else has been in the midst of all these years. He drinks his coffee, giving himself time to think.

"Also, stop being a big 'fraidy cat."

Harvey manages not to choke on his coffee, but it's a close thing and he succeeds only through years of practice at being suave. Donna clearly catches it, because she snickers. Harvey acknowledges, "There's no graceful way for me to respond to that type of libel."

"It's only libel if it's untrue. Have some faith in him, Harvey."

Because she's Donna, he admits, "Trying. Doing my best."

"No, you're not." She stands. "Do better."

\*

Harvey's meeting with Jessica, giving her the run down on a settlement negotiation he's got that afternoon, when the Skype chime on his phone goes off with the tone that signals Mike calling. Jessica looks annoyed for half a second before frowning. "Isn't it the middle of the night there?"

"Almost three," Harvey murmurs.

"Go. Make sure my satellite isn't falling into the ocean."

"Shanghai's pretty—"

"Go."

Harvey goes. He's not even out of her office, though, when he presses the button to pick the call up. "Mike."

Two things are obvious from Mike's surroundings: 1) he's in his apartment, not at the office, meaning business is probably just fine, and 2) he's got every light in the vicinity on, table lamps and nightlights included. Mike's eyes are not focused and his, "Harvey, Harvey," is more than a little shaky.

Harvey makes it to his office in record time, closing the door behind him and asking, "Nightmare?"

Mike is blinking frantically, still looking around and Harvey says, with just a touch of sharpness, "Mike. Focus on me."

Mike listens to the words, and it takes a couple of long, hard minutes, but eventually Mike's breathing slows and he doesn't seem to be looking *through* Harvey quite so much. Harvey says, "Hey."

"Hey," Mike says, running a hand over his face. "Hope you weren't doing something billable."

"You can pay the client back," Harvey tells him, keeping his voice even.

Mike laughs a little, but there's the hint of a sob in it. "I kinda-- He came and you had to give me back. You didn't want to, but he had something, a winning card, maybe. It made sense in the, in my head."

"Mike—"

"I woke up, I woke before it was too bad, but I couldn't tell where I was."

Harvey well knows that Mike's version of "too bad" is completely fucked. All he says is, "I don't care *what* he had, Mike. That was never going to happen."

Mike frowns. "I know that."

"Except—"



Mike rolls his eyes. "Harvey, I'm stressed out about a merger and three compliance schemes, worried you're going to find someone hotter, with less baggage and not half-way across the world, and missing you. I'm not mentally incapacitated."

Relieved as Harvey is Mike is not harboring doubts that Harvey might turn him back over to a complete psychopath, the fact remains, "Your concerns belie that assertion."

Mike glares at him, then. Harvey gives him his very best unruffled look. Mike counters, "You have a paralyzing fear of relationships you've nurtured since late adolescence, a general reluctance to involve yourself in the affairs of others, and a preference for women who wear high heels well. I am not, at first glance, the obvious match for you."

"First impressions are overrated."

"And yet, you wear twelve thousand dollar suits."

"Business is different."

"More or less important?" Mike asks, a challenge in his tone.

Harvey grits his teeth. "Neither, different. And I'm not saying that you don't have a point, I'm saying your analysis of the evidence you have leads you to an understandable, but ultimately faulty, conclusion."

"You talk so pretty," Mike says dryly.

Mike isn't even calling him out on obfuscation, not really, but there are shadows beneath Mike's eyes, and he's dreamt of Harvey leaving him to wolves and Harvey knows how to use his words when he so chooses, it's just rare that he does. "How's this for pretty: I love you, Mike Ross. And I think it's probably a fatal condition, so just stop worrying about stupid things like women with shapely calves."

Mike's expression is a little more blank than Harvey would prefer.

"Think you can go to sleep now?" Harvey asks.

Mike starts laughing, at first just a shaking of his shoulders and then, pretty soon, doubling over with it. When he manages to say something, he forces out, "Sleep? *Sleep*? Oh man, I love you, too."

\*

Mike leaves for Singapore a few days after Christmas and is largely incommunicado while helping Childers to close a multi-national manufacturing deal for one of their clients. Harvey is considering starting a list of things he's wanted to tell Mike when Mike himself walks into Harvey's office and says, "Hey. Happy New Year."

Harvey stands. "To you as well."

"There are some things I haven't mentioned."

"You don't say."

Mike's smile is both amused and nervous. "Can we go for a walk?"

Harvey points out, "It's fourteen below out there."

Mike is undeterred. "Good ice skating weather."

Harvey grabs his coat and follows Mike out of the building. When they're near to the sidewalk Harvey gives up on controlling himself entirely and brushes his fingers over Mike's wrist, peeking out from the hoodie that isn't nearly warm enough for how cold it is out. Mike grabs Harvey's hand and does not let go, not even once they're in the car. Harvey does not fight too hard.

Seated next to each other, Harvey swipes his lips over Mike's. They're cold. Mike responds, leaning into the kiss, deepening it just a bit, nothing too heavy. Enough for Harvey to taste the coffee on Mike's breath, enough for him to want more.

The car ride is longer than it probably should be. Harvey gives Ray an appreciative glance when he notices they're at Bryant Park, rather than Wollman, or any of the closer rinks. Ray does his clear best not to smirk. Harvey appreciates that, too.

It's been a long time since Harvey has skated, years since he's done it seriously, but he did a little bit of ice hockey before he figured out that baseball was his one true love and it's a bit like riding a bike. Mike skates with a frustrating amount of grace for someone who's fairly clumsy on his own two feet. Harvey asks, "Who taught you to skate?"

Mike says, "My mom," and it's wistful and layered, but not *sad*.

They warm up, taking a couple of laps in silence before Harvey asks, "Were you even in Singapore?"

"Yes. And yes, we closed the deal."

"And now you're here."

Mike nods sharply. "Helping to interview for my replacement, and taking a few interviews Childers set up for me to have a job here, once I leave Pearson."

Harvey risks skating backwards to look at Mike. "How long have you been planning this?"

Mike steers him clear of a couple of people, hands on Harvey's waist, the two of them closer than arm's length. "Since Thanksgiving."

"Mike—"

"Even if we don't work out, even if you get tired of my baggage or I feel stunted or whatever, I want to be with Gram. I like Shanghai, and I love the job, but it's not home and for the first time in my life I can actually find another job I'll probably like just as much."

"Stunted?" Harvey asks. He knows there was a lot in that declaration, but that's the part he can't quite get past.

Mike ignores him. "Out of curiosity, did you think you were being subtle, sending Jun to ask about my intentions?"

Harvey flips around so he's facing away from Mike again. Mike's hands

stay on his hips. Harvey does not speed up. Mike does, so they're practically pressed together. He murmurs, "My intentions are good."

Harvey rolls his eyes, but he skates at the same speed, smooth and straight.

\*

"Stunted?" Harvey asks again, later, when he's trying—failing—to concentrate on work and Mike's pretty much sleeping to the sound of CNN while sprawling on Harvey's couch.

Mike doesn't open his eyes. "I like to pretend like you're not the only one who could leave this relationship. Leave me my dignity."

Harvey chooses not to voice his opinion of Mike's undefeatable dignity. "Next time, could you pick something that won't drive me to need therapy?"

"Therapy's good for you."

"Dr. Teng tell you that?"

Mike laughs and pulls himself off the couch to slink over to where Harvey's sitting at the counter, working. He puts his hand on Harvey's chin, like he hasn't already gotten Harvey's attention by way of existing. "The *only* thing you have ever done for me was to open doors, not close them."

Harvey tries to drag his gaze back to the—not very interesting—deposition he has in front of him. Mike doesn't let go. "Humility doesn't really suit you."

Harvey's not feeling up to arguing, which is discomfiting in itself. He does what he does second best, and diverts. He gently pries Mike's hand from his chin and sucks Mike's pointer finger into his mouth. Mike's eyes go wide and his breathing speeds up. Mike's voice is admirably steady when he says, "I know what you're doing. I'm just down with you doing it."

Harvey draws off to ask, "I can't say thank you?" He's careful not to sound guileless, since he means it.

Mike steps back. "If that's what this is—"

Harvey reaches out, spreading his hand over Mike's chest, but not in a way that would stop Mike from moving away. "No, just. Just listen, okay?"

"Listening," Mike says, and doesn't move away from Harvey's touch.

"I use words to get what I want all the time," Harvey starts. "Add to that, between us, both times we've, ah, engaged in relations it's been me forcing myself on you and I realize it's selfish but there's a huge part of me that needs to know if I even *can* make it pleasurable. For you."

Mike tilts his head slightly. "Oh."

Harvey makes himself keep eye contact. Mike wets his lips and asks.

"Do you know what I remember from those times?"

Harvey hazards a guess. "Everything?"

Mike's laugh is part-amused, three-parts bitter. "You would think. And, kind of, I guess. But not really. Even eidetic memories are shaded by the person's perceptions of the event."

Harvey admits, "I don't know what that means. Not to you, not in this context."

"Both those times were about *him*, Harvey. It was always about him. All those other people, things, they were just tools. I don't connect you with that stuff because you weren't the point."

It's Harvey's turn to say, "Oh."

"This time, when it happens, you'll be the point."

Harvey nods in agreement, even if Mike has always been the point.

\*

Harvey has to party hop for the first few hours of New Year's Eve, but he arrives at the Times' Square Westin at 11:15, as promised—no small feat, given that the Square is cordoned off—and is glad to see Mike has managed as well. He's having a beer in the lounge, peering out into the madness on the street. Harvey goes to check in and gets their key before striding over to him.

Mike grins. "Happy New Year."

"Almost," Harvey agrees easily. "There's a better view from the 45th floor."

"If you say so," Mike laughs, and follows as Harvey makes his way to the elevators.

Harvey's had a number of clients stay in the Westin's Presidential Suite, but he's never used it for himself, not when he could just go home to his very own view. He'd originally booked it for the same reason he does every year, to offer to a client for the evening's festivities, but the client he'd offered it to had plans to be in London for the ringing in of the new year, and he hadn't gotten around to inviting another before Mike showed up, travel weary and gorgeous.

Harvey had thought back to a discussion they'd had over a year before, when Dr. Teng had been pushing Mike to share good memories. He'd talked and talked about this adventure he'd had, sneaking out of Vivian's when he was seventeen and going to the Square with Trevor to celebrate. He'd nearly gotten frostbite and hadn't been able to see anything, but at the time, Mike had told him, it had felt like something big, like a victory.

Harvey opens up every curtain in the room so they're staring down onto the Square and says, "I know we're not right in it, but I thought —"

Mike kisses him, genuine and fierce, and pulls back to say, "Yes."

Harvey opens the champagne housekeeping kept on ice for them and pours glasses of it. They toast at midnight, the ball having dropped near enough almost to touch, and when they kiss, it tastes of bubbles and hope. They finish half the bottle slowly, not rushing things.

Harvey says, "If you're not comfortable, just say, but there's a Jacuzzi."

Mike drags his finger around the rim of his champagne flute and says, once more, "Yes."

\*

Harvey has seen Mike naked before, of course, but he's never gotten the chance to unbutton each button on Mike's oxford, to trace his fingers along the fine line of Mike's collar bone. Mike laughs and Harvey looks up. "Ticklish?"

Mike shakes his head. "Nervous."

Harvey runs his hand down the length of Mike's arm. "We can stop."

"No. *No*. I want to see. Even if that means you seeing, too."

Harvey remembers, uncomfortably, his first few dates after joining Pearson Hardman, his awareness that he was trading up. He remembers that feeling of wanting to hide beneath his well-tailored suits, of not trusting his skin to be armor enough. His fingers find way, of their own accord, to one of the jagged, silk-soft pink lines that runs from Mike's back over a third of his ribs.

Mike says, "It's not pretty, I know."

And no, it's not, but mostly because if Harvey lets himself think too hard, he'll know how that line got there, have to make himself not think about how Mike felt as the whip curled over his torso and brought away skin and blood. Harvey slips to his knees, kissing along the skin.

Mike says, "Harvey."

Harvey looks up and tells him, "It's you. This and the unmarked spots and the things I can't see. All you. And I didn't even know what it was to want until you. So stop insulting my taste."

Mike melts a little, then, his fingers curling in Harvey's hair, leaning in to the support Harvey offers. Harvey takes advantage, undressing Mike slowly, discovering him in this context. When he's removed everything at his own pace, he looks up and offers, "Your turn?"

Mike nods, but takes a while before he starts, stroking at Harvey's hair slowly. He starts from the bottom, with Harvey's shoes and socks. His touches are exploratory, sweet and curious and hot. When Mike gets Harvey's tie undone—folding it carefully, like the rest of the suit—and works open his shirt, he mumbles, "Fuck, you're—Jesus, Harvey."

Harvey brings one of Mike's hands to his mouth and nips at the knuckles. Mike blinks rapidly at him. Harvey turns the hand over and kisses the palm. "C'mere."

They sit side-by-side as the tub fills, their feet swirling in the water. Harvey lets Mike control the temperature. There's enough room for

them to lie alongside each other in the water. Harvey's grateful, since he's not sure Mike's entirely up to holding or being held. They do kiss: slow and lazy at first, and then deeper, more frantic, until Mike's sliding atop Harvey and Harvey's arching up into him. Mike bites Harvey at the first touch of their cocks, hard enough to hurt. Harvey moans, but it isn't really a complaint.

Mike murmurs, "Sorry," his voice shaky with arousal.

Harvey's voice is low, rough, when he tells Mike honestly, "Don't be."

Mike moves again, then, both of them gasping at the feel. It's slippery and maybe a little too hot, and just a bit clumsy. Mike falls off Harvey at one point, and they laugh together, Harvey turning into Mike, trying it that way. In the end they return to Mike being on top, Harvey's hand running up and down Mike's back.

Harvey comes first, but Mike isn't too far behind, not so much so that Harvey has to worry it isn't good for him, or has to fall into any unwanted memories. They lie against each other for a while, until the water starts to feel cool. Harvey runs them a second bath, this one to clean up, clean each other.

When they've gotten out and dried off and crawled into bed, Mike whispers, "Happy New Year."

Harvey agrees by way of a kiss to Mike's shoulder. Mike seems to understand.

\*

After Harvey drops Mike off at the airport, he drives himself to Jessica's. He doesn't actually plan on doing it, but he isn't surprised to realize that's where he's gone. He rings the doorbell. She answers after a few minutes, looks at him, and offers, "Hot chocolate?"

Jessica isn't precisely a genius in the kitchen, but she's competent, much as she is in so many other areas. Even if she weren't, her mother sends her Jacques Torres Wicked hot chocolate mix every year for Christmas. "Yes, please."

She stands back and he steps inside. Harvey hasn't been to Jessica's place in a while and it surprises him anew, the way it always has, the warmth of her home. It is nothing like the bold, modern office she keeps at work, instead sporting the handmade quilts that are her sister's specialty, and gorgeous, antique mahogany wood pieces that her father and she have traveled far and wide to find. He follows her into the kitchen, and sits at the table, teak and hand-carved.

As she heats the milk, her back to him, he asks, "Remember that time we got extremely, unwisely drunk and did that thing we Do Not Speak Of?"

"We don't speak of that," she says lightly.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Harvey—"

"The ink on your spine. Is the person who did it still working?"

She turns to him then, the look on her face unreadable. "Why?"

Harvey knows why they don't talk about that night. He knows she thinks she took advantage of him and that for years, if he'd been allowed to talk about it, he probably would have ended up on his knees, begging for more. He also knows no silence will ever bleed his memories of that night from him, will ever take the recall of running his fingers over the stylized Roman numeral fourteen gracing her very middle vertebrae away. "Because I decided that night that if I was ever going to put something on my skin, it was going to be done as well as yours."

Jessica turns back to the stove, concentrating on melting the chocolate evenly. She pours it into two cups and comes to sit at the table with Harvey. "Can I ask what it is you want done?"

Harvey hesitates for a second, but he's *seen* hers, *touched* it. This seems only fair. He digs into his jeans' pocket and pulls up the bracelet.

She takes it from him. "You keep it with you?"

Harvey takes a sip, then two. He can't look at her as he says, "It helps."

"Helps what?"

Harvey shrugs. "Me to feel like he's safe. Like he's not so far away."

Jessica leans back into her chair, taking a sip. After a moment she raises her legs, slipping her bare feet onto Harvey's lap. "Jesus, kid."

Harvey's smile is bittersweet. "I just want the name of the artist."

"No. No, if you just wanted that, you'd have waited until tomorrow and asked me in the office, private and professional."

He looks up at her, because sure, she's right, but generally she lets him get away with lies like that, if for no other reason than it means she doesn't have to acknowledge there's more going on. "Jessica."

"He's still in business. I refer people to him now and then."

"The name?"

"I'll have Donna schedule an appointment for some time when I can go with you."

"I don't need someone to hold my hand." Harvey manages wry amusement.

"I know," she tells him, and even sounds like she believes him. "But it's easier with a friend to talk to."

He squeezes one of her feet, and drinks his hot chocolate slowly, a silent acknowledgment that having her around makes a lot of things easier.

\*

In late Januarv. a storm hits the citv covering evrvthina and

everywhere in eighteen to twenty-one inches of snow and knocking the power for half the boroughs out. Downtown Manhattan itself is fine, so Pearson Hardman is still up and running, but Ray calls to say it's going to take him a while first to shovel the car out and second to get there, with none of the lights in Brooklyn functioning. Harvey calls Donna, who informs him all three of his meetings have called to cancel, and Harvey tells Ray not to bother, he'll work from home.

His ankle still itches where a replica of Mike's Indebted bracelet—minus Harvey's information—was inked in a little less than two weeks earlier, and it's nice not to have to cover it in a sock, rather just working the hypo-allergenic sensitive-skin lotion over the area and allowing it to open-air dry. It's also nice to be able to look at it now and then. Harvey hasn't quite gotten used to it being there, gotten to where he can leave the original bracelet somewhere safe, and know what he has is enough.

The storm is something of a blessing, really, in that it gives Harvey time to catch up on a number of things. Jun's apartment and surrounding area have also lost power, which means he was unable to take the subway and the buses were a complete mess. Harvey almost tells him to stay home, but then realizes Jun's apartment doesn't have any heat. The kid finally makes it into the office at around noon, and the two of them gchat through anything that needs to be discussed, Jun taking care of the stuff that cannot be done remotely.

Harvey tells him, "Stay at the office tonight. Use the couch."

Jun doesn't even argue, which tells Harvey exactly how exhausted he is. Harvey works through the day and into the evening, raiding his kitchen a few times in order to keep himself going. He's not sure anyone's going to deliver to him in this mess. He misses Mike's uncanny ability to make comfort food in circumstances that are less than ideal.

The snow has picked up again by the time the sun sets, and Harvey finds himself with his arm hooked over the back of his couch, watching, entranced. It's been a while since the last snowstorm this extensive, before Mike came into his life. Mike once told Harvey he hated snow, but Harvey caught him staring at the first fall last winter, looking calm.

Mike explained, "I hate having to bike in it, or the fact that heating costs so much in the winter. I guess I don't actually hate *it*."

For the first time ever, Harvey had wanted to go out and play in the damn snow, make angels and snowmen, see what Mike would come up with. For now, though, he Skypes Mike, pretty sure he'll be awake and into his first cup of coffee.

Mike answers, but he points with intent to the coffee mug he's got in his hand and doesn't say anything. Harvey laughs softly, and nods, the two of them sitting in silence, and it's almost like their Sunday mornings except for all the ways in which it is not. After a while, Mike says, "Hi."

"Had a snow day," Harvey tells him.

"Oh yeah? You play hookey?"

"I stayed home."

"All day?" There's a wistfulness to Mike's question.



"Come home," Harvey says in response to it. Because the day has been warm and comfortable and beautiful and *empty*.

"I'm coming, babe."

\*

It is a year, two months and six days after Mike left for China that he steps off a plane and back onto American soil with the intention of staying. It is three years, five months, a week and two days after Harvey played the most important hand of poker in his life. Harvey knows both these things, so he does not doubt Mike does as well.

A couple of days from now, there will be a welcome home party, commissioned by Harvey but planned by Donna. It's better that way; means the party will actually be enjoyable. For now, though, Harvey's going to take them to their favorite pizza joint on their way to Vivian's, and spend the evening watching Mike reconnect with his only blood-family in the world.

Mike eats his pizza slowly, teaching Vivian Chinese words, and regaling both of them with stories about the flight home. Vivian tells him about the new male resident that quite a few of the women have set their eyes on. Mike asks, "What about you?"

Vivian grins. "I've got me two handsome men. What the hell would I need a third for?"

Harvey smiles back. He suspects that in her prime, Vivian probably *was* his dream woman. Mike kisses her cheek. She chats at him for a few more minutes before admonishing, "Go home. Rest up. I'll see you in a couple of days, when you can keep your eyes open."

They leave shortly after that. Mike falls asleep on the ride home. Harvey wakes him by softly calling his name. Mike still isn't good with being woken by touch. Harvey doesn't think he ever will be.

Mike starts to drop his stuff off in his room, but Harvey redirects him to Harvey's room and points to where he's cleared out half the drawers and one side of the closet for Mike. Mike blinks several times before saying, "Weirdly, I don't know that I was sure you were serious about this until this moment."

Harvey laughs. "Don't think I didn't consider just having the closet expanded."

Lined against Harvey's bedroom wall are the boxes filled with things Mike had shipped. Mike stares at them. Harvey says, "They'll be there in the morning."

Mike nods. "Right now, I need a shower."

Harvey changes into a pair of boxers and a t-shirt while Mike is washing the travel from himself. He pours a glass of wine and takes it into the bedroom where he reads in bed, sipping, as he waits for Mike to emerge. Eventually he does, flushed and smelling of pine and soap. Harvey holds out the wine, offering it to him. Mike takes a couple of swallows and hands it back.

His gaze is doing an appreciative sweep of Harvey when it stops, zeroing in on Harvey's right ankle. "You have a tattoo."

"Decided to go the captain obvious route?" Harvey asks, pretending to be absorbed in his e-reader.

"Harvey," Mike says, touching his finger to where the ink still rises slightly from the skin. "Harvey, that's my bracelet."

Harvey bites back a smile, not raising his face. Mike turns, though, and brings Harvey's chin up with his hand. "Harvey."

"Mike," Harvey says softly.

"Don't you know you're never supposed to tattoo the name of your significant other onto yourself? It's like a curse."

Harvey looks directly into Mike's eyes and says, "I'm not worried."

"What if—"

Harvey shifts up enough to cut Mike off with a kiss. "I'm not worried."

Mike pulls back, looking at Harvey, expression intent and unsure, assessing and hopeful. Harvey asks, "Are *you* worried?"

It takes a second, but Mike shakes his head, slowly. "No. No, I'm not."

Harvey feels Mike's hand close itself over the expanse of inked skin, a flesh-and-bone ankle cuff. Harvey does not feel any need to escape, the way he has all other confines before. Harvey says, "Good. Then come to bed."

Mike's squeeze tightens to something just short of painful. He is still for a moment before he surges onto the bed, over Harvey. "What a great suggestion. I think I will."

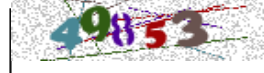
Options ▼

Name:

Review:

Rating:  ▼

Enter the security code shown below:



Submit

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.

Skin by [egelantier](#), photo by [microbophile](#)